

A Remnant Will Return: An Analysis of the Literary Function of the Remnant Motif in Isaiah

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The remnant motif has been rightly recognized as a significant feature in the Hebrew Bible. And yet, while various studies have helpfully catalogued its occurrences, far too little attention has been given to developing the motif as a complex literary device. This article assesses the nature of the remnant motif in the book of Isaiah. It is argued that the motif exhibits a two-fold function as both a threat of impending judgment as well as an indication of blessing. To accomplish this task, this article surveys the relevant passages under two primary categories: 1) the remnant motif in prophetic oracle and 2) the remnant motif in prophetic narrative. Within each of these sections, the motif is shown to have a positive or negative literary function. In prophetic oracles, the motif is used with both senses with respect to Judah yet only functions negatively when used in relation to the nations. The motif is used in Isaiah's prophetic narratives in order to further the negative and positive characterization of Ahaz and Hezekiah respectively. It is argued that a proper understanding of the dual nature of this motif benefits not only readers of the Hebrew Bible, but also aids proper interpretation of various New Testament passages.

KEYWORDS: *Remnant, Isaiah, Judgment, Ahaz, Hezekiah, Oracles Against the Nations*

The concept of remnant is unquestionably prominent in the Hebrew Bible. In some instances, only the presence of the motif itself can reconcile the tension between salvation and judgment.¹ Of its many instances

1. One clear example is the destruction decreed upon “all flesh” in Gen 6:13—the single exception of Noah and his family. See M. W. Elliott, “Remnant,” in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (ed. Brian S. Rosner et al. Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2000), 723. Sirach 47:17 clearly understands Noah as a prototypical remnant community: “Noah was

in the Hebrew Bible, the Latter Prophets make regular use of remnant imagery, not least of which is found in the book of Isaiah. The sheer number of relevant lexical occurrences in the book evidence the significance of the motif as a literary feature. And while the positive aspects of the remnant in Isaiah are almost universally recognized, one neglected dimension is the use of the motif as a word of judgment itself. Here it functions not as evidence of YHWH's mercy and blessing but rather as a picture of the severity of judgment. While the former may not be completely absent, the emphasis falls on the negative aspect of the motif in the latter.

This article will argue that the remnant motif in Isaiah embodies two distinct literary functions in the book, both as a *threat* in contexts of judgment, as well as a *guarantee of hope* in contexts of salvation. The malleability of the motif enables this flexible usage in either context in the book.² As will be shown, the remnant pictures both how bad the situation in Judah is or will be (negative sense) and the purpose of YHWH to preserve and prosper his people (positive sense).

By way of procedure, this article will first survey the relevant passages regarding the remnant motif in the book of Isaiah, dividing the texts into two primary categories: 1) the remnant motif in prophetic oracles and 2) the remnant motif in prophetic narrative. While remnant theology could arguably be invoked in the wake of any scene of judgment in the book, the scope of this article will be confined to instances of the motif expressed by relevant lexical data, as well as explicit contextual indicators. Admittedly, the broad sweep of this survey precludes exhaustive analysis of each passage. These dual categories, however, will serve to explicate the two-fold literary function of the motif more broadly. Finally, in light of the conclusions drawn from the data, this article will briefly assess the significance of the motif for the theology of the New Testament.

found perfect and righteous; in the time of wrath he was taken in exchange; for this reason there was a remnant [κατάλειμμα] left on the earth when the flood came.”

2. For the purposes of this analysis, the final form of the book is the locus of investigation. In other words, this article does not pursue the historical question of the diachronic development of the motif but rather focuses on the literary function in the canonical shape of the book. My reading of the motif is not dependent on a particular view of Isaianic authorship. For discussion on synchronic approaches to Isaiah, see Brevard S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), 325–34; Christopher R. Seitz, *Prophecy and Hermeneutics: Toward a New Introduction to the Prophets* (Studies in Theological Interpretation; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 93–111. For a survey of contemporary approaches, see Jim McInnes, “A Methodological Reflection on Unified Readings of Isaiah,” *Colloquium* 42 (2010): 67–84.

THE REMNANT MOTIF IN PROPHETIC ORACLES

This first category constitutes the most prominent setting for the motif in Isaiah. This section will survey oracles under three headings: 1) the remnant motif as threat against the nations; 2) the remnant motif as indication of blessing for Judah; and 3) the remnant motif as threat against Judah. It may be noted that there exists no instance of the remnant motif as an indication of blessing for the nations in Isaiah. If classified correctly, these texts evidence the two-fold function of the motif as both a positive and negative literary feature.

Remnant as a Threat against the Nations

Isaiah specifically employs the remnant motif in six texts in the Oracles against the Nations, portending the severity of the coming destruction (14:22, 30; 15:9; 16:14; 17:3; 24:6). The narrow scope of judgment, excluding only Assyria, Cush, and Egypt, expands to a global scale. With respect to the remnant, Isaiah never utilizes the motif positively in any of these occurrences.

Chapter 13 announces judgment on Babylon (13:1–22). This unit is followed by the denunciation of Babylon’s king (14:4–23), with a salvation oracle concerning Israel situated in between (14:1–3). YHWH concludes his taunt with a decree to cut off from Babylon both “name and remnant (שאר), descendants and posterity” (14:22). The two pairs of coordinating phrases display the fruitless future of the nation, as the only hope of offspring is severed. The rhetorical effect of the language is clear: YHWH’s judgment of Babylon is comprehensive. The great name the nation once enjoyed will be reduced to nothing more than a vague memory. In this context the remnant rhetorically depicts the severity of the impending destruction YHWH will accomplish.

The second oracle is announced against Philistia in 14:30. Set in the year that Ahaz died (v. 28), Isaiah prophesies the downfall of Philistia, establishing a contrast between the poor and needy who dwell in safety and those who will be killed by a divine famine (v. 30). More specifically, the disaster is said to fall upon the root (שרש) and remnant (שארית) of Philistia. The mention of “root” here may initially appear enigmatic, as one would expect a conceptually parallel noun to “remnant.” Yet, the context of judgment may shed light on its usage here. The noun שרש is found in several passages in the Latter Prophets to indicate the extent of destruction that will be accomplished (cf. Isa 5:24; Hos

9:16; Amos 2:9; Mal 4:1).³ Though “root” and “remnant” are not conceptually equivalent, the parallelism indicates that both the source of Philistia’s life (“root”) and remaining population will be decimated.⁴ Thus, the destruction of the Philistines will encompass the whole of the population, from young to old, first to last, with the remnant motif illustrating the universality of judgment.

The next two occurrences of the remnant motif in the Oracles against the Nations address Moab (15:9; 16:14). The unit begins with a lament of Moab’s cities that have been laid waste (15:1–6). The desperate outcry of the nation had done little to secure safety and comfort for the people (v. 2). The sound of their wailing was audible even to the most distant regions of their territory (v. 8).⁵ And though the land had been filled with the carnage of judgment, with rivers of blood reminiscent of the plagues of Egypt, YHWH would bring yet more (v. 9). Isaiah labels those who have survived the initial slaughter “escapees of Moab” (פליטת מואב) and the “remnant of the land” (שארית אדמה). The fate of these survivors, however was no brighter than that of those lining the bloody riverbanks. One like a lion was to come upon them (v. 9c). The image of the remnant here expresses the hopelessness of the nation, as judgment will be dealt fully and the remnant itself destroyed.

The second instance of the remnant motif as a threat against Moab comes at the close of the section (16:14). The wailing begun in 15:2 continues through the end of chapter 16, detailing the nation’s demise. Isaiah concludes the unit by reaffirming the certainty of judgment within a chronological framework (v. 14). After three years, Moab, despite its glory and grandeur, would be brought to shame, leaving only a weak remnant (שאר) behind.

While the previous mention of the remnant in 15:9 is more forceful in its threatening character, the motif in 16:14 carries a subtler tone of despair. At the climax of the prediction of judgment, Isaiah marks a specific time in Moab’s near future where it will be brought low. The

3. Wildberger understands the “root” mentioned in the previous verse (v. 29) to function expegetically, with the meaning of father/predecessor. The two verses, then, would describe both the thoroughness of blessing (29c–30b) and the threat of judgment (29a, 30c–d). See H. Wildberger, *Isaiah 13–27: A Continental Commentary* (trans. T. H. Trapp Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), 96.

4. So Gerhard F. Hasel, *The Remnant: The History and Theology of the Remnant Idea from Genesis to Isaiah* (2nd ed.; Andrews University Monographs 5; Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1974), 335; Wildberger, *Isaiah 13–27*, 97.

5. G. V. Smith, *Isaiah 1–39* (NAC 15A; Nashville: B & H, 2007), 331.

prophet need not recast the vision of bloodshed that will precede this remnant, but allows the silence of the empty land to portray the reality of desolation. Thus, to this point in the Oracles against the Nations this verse constitutes the most positive use of the motif. It is one, however, that is itself hardly a message of hope.⁶

The remnant motif further serves as a threat against Syria in 17:3 during the events of the Syro-Ephramite coalition. The chapter, beginning with a מִשָּׁח heading, identifies Damascus as the object of the oracle (v. 1).⁷ The climax of 17:1–3 comes with the prediction of the parallel destinies of “children of Israel” and “the remnant of Aram” (שְׂאֵר אַרָם). The reader can discern a note of irony as Israel’s glory serves as the archetype of Syria’s future standing. Verses 1–3 together present two empty kingdoms, void of fortresses, brought low in judgment.⁸ The following verses (4–6) continue the negative imagery in terms of a malnourished man (v. 4) and a barren olive tree (v. 6). The remnant motif thus functions as a threat against both Syria and Ephraim in like fashion to the other nations addressed in the larger literary unit. Whereas the nation was established, the destruction executed by YHWH will reach even to the remnant.

The final occurrence of the remnant motif as a threat against the nations is found in the announcement of judgment in chapter 24. Following the Oracles against the Nations, Isaiah expands YHWH’s

6. Hasel (*The Remnant*, 372) views the positive and negative aspects of the remnant motif as equally present in the passage.

7. A problem arises in verse 2 with the mention of Aroer (עֲרֹר) as a seeming parallel capital city alongside Damascus. The Hebrew Bible includes 15 references to cities called Aroer, but none of which lay in close proximity to Syria. There have been four primary solutions offered in response: 1) identify an otherwise unknown city in Syria as the referent here (John Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah*, vol. 1 [NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986], 348); 2) treat verse two as a misplaced editorial insertion (Wildberger, *Isaiah 13–27*, 168); 3) view the text as corrupted needing emendation (following the LXX); 4) view the Aroer here as an Israelite city (Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 1–39: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* [AB; New York: Doubleday, 2000], 304). Though this text presents difficulty, the need for emendation is unwarranted with the MT as perfectly intelligible in the literary framework of the passage. It is best to see the Aroer mentioned here as the city located in the territory previously allotted to Reuben (Deut 2:36; Josh 12:2; 2 Kgs 10:33), which itself later fell under the dominion of Syria. With an ABBA pattern linking the downfall of Syria (A) to that of Israel (B), the interconnectedness of the unit precludes the need for emendation or the relocation of the passage. So J. A. Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah: An Introduction & Commentary* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1993), 156.

8. Contra Motyer (*The Prophecy of Isaiah*, 156–57), who takes the remnant here as another instance of Gentile inclusion.

desolation to the whole earth as those who have violated the everlasting covenant.⁹ The world is consumed by a curse that dispenses the retributive justice of YHWH as the penalty for its guilt. In the wake of YHWH's justice only a few (רִשָׁא) are left alive (24:6). The circumstances out of which the remnant appears evince its literary function in illustrating the negative connotation of the motif. Here again, the remnant displays how bad the situation is in the wake of judgment. In the final analysis, the remnant motif, as surveyed in this study, serves only as a threat when used in reference to the nations. Among the images of desolation employed by Isaiah, the remnant motif serves as an apt illustration of the severity of YHWH's judgment.

Remnant as an Indication of Blessing for Judah

In contrast to the threat of judgment, Isaiah presents five instances of the remnant motif in contexts of blessing for Judah (4:3; 10:20–21; 11:11, 16; 28:5; 46:3–4). Together, these passages emphasize both the temporal and future realities of salvation for those who are faithful to YHWH. What remains after judgment is a purified community who, being led through a new exodus, experiences the blessing and protection of YHWH.¹⁰ Of these five passages, four occur as a positive feature of the Day of YHWH.¹¹

9. Though it may be argued that the “everlasting covenant” here is a reference to the covenant made with Noah in Gen 9:16, various factors stand against this interpretation. One obstacle for this view is the mention of transgression/violation of the laws and statutes. Such covenant obligations were not applicable to those outside Israel, and thus the scope of this covenant should be kept within the borders of the covenant people. Paul R. Raabe rightly notes the prophetic tendency to employ rhetorical of universal judgment for specific exhortations in a local situations, here being the sin of Israel. See Paul R. Raabe, “The Particularizing of Universal Judgment in Prophetic Discourse,” *CBQ* 64 (2002): 652–74. I am particularly indebted to Duane A. Garrett for his interaction on this passage.

10. Webb states that the purification of Zion is the key to its transformation, a fact that holds the key to the structure of Isaiah as a whole. See Barry G. Webb, “Zion in Transformation: A Literary Approach to Isaiah,” in *Bible in Three Dimensions: Essays in Celebration of Forty Years of Biblical Study* (ed. David J. A. Clines, Stephen E. Fowl, and Stanley E. Porter; JSOTSup 87; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1990).

11. Many view the Day of YHWH as a central concern of the Latter Prophets. VanGemen identifies six features of the Day of YHWH in the Hebrew Bible: 1) the Day signifies YHWH's intrusion into human affairs; 2) the Day brings judgment on all creation; 3) the Day is historical and eschatological; 4) on the Day, all creation will submit to YHWH's sovereignty, willingly or not; 5) no social distinction is observed on that Day, but rather, the righteous are separated from the wicked; and 6) the Day signifies

The first text is Isa 4:2–6, which, following the judgment of 3:1–4:1, describes a purified people who are led through a new exodus, constituting a holy remnant. The *ביום ההוא* formula at the beginning of verse 2 links the events of chapter 4 with the eschatological destruction foretold in the previous chapter. The section (4:2–6) opens with a description of the beautiful and glorious landscape of the renewed Jerusalem (v. 2).¹² Isaiah describes the remnant community both as those who are “left [יתר] in Zion” and those who “remain [שאר] in Jerusalem” (4:3). It is clear that this remnant has survived the devastation of YHWH’s judgment. But more than merely continuing a meager existence, these survivors emerge as a holy people (vv. 3–4). The purpose of YHWH is to cleanse those in Jerusalem by judgment, establishing a new, faithful wilderness generation.¹³ As a clear statement about the positive

vindication, glorification, and full redemption of the godly. See Willem, VanGemeren, *Interpreting the Prophetic Word: An Introduction to the Prophetic Literature of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 174–76; Greg A. King, “The Day of the Lord in Zephaniah,” *BibSac* 152 (1995): 16–32; Rolf Rendtorff, “Alas for the Day!: The ‘Day of the Lord’ in the Book of the Twelve,” in *God in the Fray: A Tribute to Walter Brueggemann* (ed. Tod Linafelt and Timothy K. Beal; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998), 186–197; Paul R. House, “The Day of the Lord,” in *Central Themes in Biblical Theology: Mapping Unity in Diversity* (ed. Scott J. Hafemann and Paul R. House; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 179–224.

12. A considerable amount of debate has emerged regarding the proper interpretation of the branch of YHWH (*צמח יהוה*), with a common view of the branch as representative of the messianic king described elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible. Yet, such a reading does not make the best sense of the context, especially in relation to the parallel subject “the fruit of the land.” The construction itself (*צמח יהוה*) occurs only here in the Hebrew Bible. This is not to say that Isaiah (cf. 11:1), among other authors (cf. Jer 23:5), could not use the term messianically, but to require a messianic interpretation based solely on lexical grounds may demand too much of the lexeme. Rather, the branch here describes the new habitation of the glorified remnant, which itself is a drastic reversal of the unfortunate conditions previously experienced by the nation. Whereas YHWH had formerly cut off the sustaining resources of Jerusalem and Judah (3:1), he now personally restores the fortunes of the “survivors of Israel.” For support of this interpretation, see Hasel, *The Remnant*, 263; Otto Kaiser, *Isaiah 1–12: A Commentary* (trans. R. A. Wilson; OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1972), 1:54; Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 1–39*, 203; John D. W. Watts, *Isaiah 1–33* (WBC 24; Dallas: Word, 1985), 49. The LXX deviates significantly from the MT with the reading *ἐπιλάμψει ὁ θεὸς ἐν βουλῇ ἡμετ ἀδόξης ἐπ ἰότης γῆς*. Such a translation could have risen from the understanding of an Aramaic verbal form of *צמח* (“to shine”). See Rodrigo Franklin De Sousa, *Eschatology and Messianism in LXX Isaiah 1–12* (LHBOTS 516; New York: T&T Clark, 2010), 64.

13. This link to Israel’s previous history is seen in verse 5 as the imagery of the cloud by day and fire by night brings to remembrance YHWH’s deliverance of Israel from Egypt (Exod 13:21–22). This inner-biblical allusion serves to show that the covenant relationship enjoyed by ancient Israel will be appropriated to the eschatological remnant community. So Hasel, *The Remnant*, 266.

future of the remnant community, Isa 4:2–6 establishes a hope beyond the destruction of the Day of YHWH for those who remain.

A second occurrence of the remnant motif as an indication of blessing for Judah is found in Isa 10. Here a negative use of the remnant motif (10:22–23), discussed below, forms a sharp contrast to the hopeful description of the remnant's future (10:20–21).¹⁴ Here, standing in parallel to “survivors [פליטת] of the house of Jacob” (v. 20), the remnant is said to alter its allegiance from Assyria to YHWH.¹⁵ The positive aspect of the remnant is substantiated by the parallel phrase, with the root פלט being used only of Israel in a positive sense in Isaiah (4:2; 37:31–32). Those who survive the judgment of YHWH in the text are renewed in their trust, returning to their mighty God. The phrase שאר ישוב (“a remnant will return”) (v. 21a) constitutes the second occurrence of this expression in the book (cf. 7:3), clearly indicating a positive situation for Judah. Rather than returning to a geographical location, Judah will return to a person, namely YHWH. With this restoration, the positive sense of the phrase cannot be missed. Having established the positive aspect of the remnant in verses 20–21, these comments will suffice for the present section, though a further analysis of these verses will be resumed below.

A third instance of the remnant as blessing for Judah is found in chapter 11. Isaiah, following a description of the righteous reign of a messianic figure (vv. 1–10), links the renewed conditions of the earth to the ingathering of the remnant community who have been scattered across the world. A ביום ההוא formula connects verse 11 with its parallel in verse 10, where the Davidic messiah is described as a counselor for the nations. At that time, YHWH declares his intention to purchase for a second time the “remnant that remains of his people” (שאר עמו אשר ישאר) dwelling in foreign lands (v. 11). This miraculous deliverance is a new

14. The sudden shift in tone leads many scholars to label the passage as secondary (cf. Hans Wildberger, *Isaiah 1–12: A Commentary* [trans. Thomas H. Trapp; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991], 435). Yet, the dual sense of the remnant motif allows this passage to be read as a unity at the literary level.

15. Many have noted the historical problem raised by this passage, particularly in relation to the events in the time of Ahaz. The discussion typically centers on the fact that though Ahaz did rely on Assyria, he was not struck by the nation (2 Kgs 16). Some scholars have argued for a delayed fulfillment in the time of Hezekiah in an effort to alleviate the tension. Oswalt is likely correct stating the passage does not specify a particular nation, but represents any nation that would contend with YHWH for Israel's trust. The eschatological character of the passage lends further support to this conclusion. See Bernhard Duhm, *Das Buch Jesaia* (5th ed.; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1902), 75; Kaiser, *Isaiah 1–12*, 147; Hasel, *The Remnant*, 322–23; Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah*, vol. 1, 270.

exodus.¹⁶ With the previous mention of the righteous reign of the messiah, the remnant, presumably, will be led to the new promised land where the Davidic messiah will be enthroned.¹⁷ Yet, like the first exodus, the remnant will not depart before plundering (בזז) the nations where they were in exile (11:14; cf. Exod 3:22). Moreover, the new exodus not only serves to free the remnant from her captivity, but also brings peace between the northern and southern kingdoms (11:13). Moreover, the result of YHWH's action creates a direct route from the nations to the land of Israel in order to speed their return. So Isaiah, for a second time, utilizes the exodus from Israel's early history as a pattern of deliverance for the remnant community in the future.¹⁸

The next instance of the remnant motif used as an indication of blessing for Judah occurs in 28:5. Opening with an oracle against the leaders of the northern kingdom, Isaiah portrays them in terms of a drunkard lacking sober judgment. Verse 5 begins with another ביום ההוא statement, alluding to the judgment previously mentioned against Israel.¹⁹ By use of parallel language and imagery, a contrast is clearly established between the future blessing of the remnant community and an indictment against Ephraim. Samaria, the capital city of the northern kingdom, is addressed as a "crown of pride" adorning the senseless nation. Yet the beauty of the city is already fading like a wilting flower

16. While the mention of a second redemption in Isa 11:11 has provoked much scholarly debate, the imagery in the passage evokes once again the exodus from Egypt as its reference point. A combination of features in the text bears out this conclusion, the first of which is the mention of Egypt itself (vv. 11, 15, 16). Second, the following description of a miraculous deliverance from foreign lands, particularly in verse 15, further supports the thematic connection, as Israelites who have been banished and dispersed to alien regions will once again walk through river channels on land that YHWH has dried up (cf. Exod 14:21–22). As with many other biblical authors, Isaiah presents the exodus as a paradigmatic model for YHWH's future deliverance of the remnant. For the literary function of appeals to ancient traditions, see Norman C. Habel, "Appeal to Ancient Tradition as a Literary Form," *ZAW* 88 (1976): 253–72.

17. Smith, *Isaiah 1–39*, 276. Watts (*Isaiah 1–33*, 179) correctly views the mention of the nations as anticipating the "four corners of the earth" in verse 12.

18. Here, the character quality of the remnant is evident in the following chapter (Isa 12). The remnant proclaims the salvation of their God who has turned his away his anger. Such a declaration is a fitting conclusion to the literary unit of Isa 1–11, as YHWH is said to dwell in the midst of his purified people (12:6). See Webb, "Zion in Transformation," 73.

19. The sudden shift in verses 5 and 6 to a positive note of prosperity appear seemingly as an interruption of the diatribe against Ephraim resumed again in verse 7. Yet at this point in the book such contrasting tones may not be unexpected (cf. 10:20–24 below).

(v. 1, 4).²⁰ In characteristic response to the proud, YHWH acts to bring low the arrogance of the people, readying one, generally acknowledged as Assyria, to bring swift destruction (vv. 2–4). This devastation is juxtaposed to the blessing of the remnant community (שאר) who is decked not with a “crown of pride” but rather with YHWH as a “crown of glory” (v. 5).²¹ Isaiah furthers the contrast with a masterful word play in verses 4–5: whereas Samaria, situated at the head (ראש) of the lush valley (v. 4), was soon to be destroyed, the remnant (שאר), adorned with YHWH’s presence, will dwell in security. The reversal of the consonants ראש and שאר displays the inverse fates of each respective group.²²

The final instance of the remnant motif as an indication of blessing for Judah comes in the contrast drawn between the idols of Babylon and YHWH in chapter 46. While the gods of Babylon do nothing more than burden those who carry them (v. 1–2), YHWH as the living God has borne “all the remnant [שארית] of the house of Israel” from their birth (v. 3).²³ In showing the futility of trusting in idols, YHWH summons all the people to hear and remember his work of

20. The referent of עטרת גאות, whether the leaders of the nation or its capital city, is not clear in the Hebrew text. Several indications, however, support Samaria as the preferable option. First, that the leaders are envisioned as the drunkards themselves is clarified by verses 7 and 14, which, directly addressing national leaders, continue the pattern of verse 1. If correct, the crown here would require a different referent than the leaders. Second, a parallel phrase (עטרת תפארת) is used to later describe the city of Zion in 62:3. Finally, the location of the crown in the lush valley (1c) fits well with the geographical situation of Samaria. Though the crown metaphor can indeed represent individuals (cf. v. 5), these points support Samaria as the referent here. As such, the city of Samaria serves as the pinnacle of pride for the senseless leaders of the northern kingdom.

21. Some scholars, such as Motyer, have argued for a messianic interpretation of this passage, following the Targum. Yet the emphasis of the passage focuses on the direct relation of YHWH to remnant community. There does not seem to be indication of the inclusion of a messianic figure as an intermediary here. See Smith, *Isaiah 1–39*, 478; *pace* Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah*, 44.

22. J. Cheryl Exum, “‘Whom Will He Teach Knowledge?’ A Literary Approach to Isaiah 28,” in *Art and Meaning: Rhetoric in Biblical Literature* (ed. Alan J. Hauser, David J. A. Clines, and David M. Gunn; JSOTSup 19; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1982), 117.

23. The remnant in 46:3b stands in parallel to “house of Jacob” in 3a, representing the whole of the people. Oswalt argues that the two lines form a case of stepped synonymous parallelism with both parts referring to the whole nation. See John Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah*, vol. 2 (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 226. Against this view is Delitzsch, who views the lines as differentiating the northern and southern kingdoms. See Franz Delitzsch, *Isaiah* (trans. James Martin Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1950), 2:233. Blenkinsopp (*Isaiah 40–55*, 268) rejects an identification of the northern kingdom in the verse, for whom the author of 40–55 supposedly “[manifests] no great interest.”

redemption. The preservation of his covenant people, manifest in the remnant, is an act that no god of Babylon could accomplish. In comparison to the idols, YHWH is one who is able to keep his people, no matter how small, throughout the whole of their lives. And though the addressees would later be called “transgressors” (v. 8) and “stubborn of heart” (v. 12), verses 3–4 magnify the care of YHWH for the people, establishing a positive literary function for the remnant.²⁴

As seen in this section, Isaiah makes use of the remnant motif to describe the blessing of YHWH towards his covenant people. The emphasis of the motif is one of hope, as YHWH prospers the nation, leading them through a new exodus. Yet unlike the previous wilderness generation, the remnant is marked by purity and faithfulness, standing opposite those who will be destroyed.

Remnant as an Indication of the Severity of Judgment on Judah

The final category for the remnant in prophetic oracles in the book of Isaiah is as an indication of the severity of judgment for Judah. Herein lies the most neglected, and perhaps most controversial, aspect of the remnant motif in contemporary discussion. While the motif itself can function as an illustration of the mercy and blessing of YHWH toward his covenant people, this secondary literary function portrays the extent and severity of destruction. In these texts, the author uses the concept of remnant as a polemic against unfaithful Judah in like fashion to the nations, describing the degree of desolation that will indeed occur. What is emphasized by the motif in these texts is not a future community that is plentiful and holy but rather a meager population left in the wake of YHWH’s justice. As with the positive oracles of salvation, the negative oracles against Judah contain both a temporal, as well as eschatological, dimension. Isaiah utilizes the remnant motif in this way in three texts (1:9; 6:13; 10:22).

The first of these references comes in the opening chapter of the book, which details the coming devastation as a result of the nation’s sin. Here, Isaiah describes the land as desolate and overthrown by foreigners (v. 7) with three pictures of its empty condition (v. 8): a booth in a vineyard, a hut in a cucumber field, and a besieged city. Together, these

24. So Klaus Baltzer (*Deutero-Isaiah: A Commentary on Isaiah 40–55* [trans. Margaret Kohl; Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001], 258), though one need not agree with his view of the historical development of the motif. It should also be noted that a positive use of the remnant here does not preclude a future winnowing of the people. Precisely because of the mention of the infidelity of the nation in v. 8 and v. 12, one may expect such a future act of YHWH.

images show the devastating aftermath of an army that has executed the judgment of YHWH. In verse 9, Isaiah states, “If YHWH of hosts had not left [יִתָּר] us a few survivors [שְׂרִיד כְּמַעַט], we would be as Sodom, and be like Gomorrah.”²⁵ The term “survivors” here is a label expressing the meager condition of the remnant.²⁶ While the mercy of YHWH can be seen in the sparing of a remnant,²⁷ the extent of the destruction seems to be the primary function of the motif in the passage.²⁸ In other words, the devastation would be so complete that if YHWH had not left these individuals in the land, the nation would be eradicated. The rhetoric in the passage demonstrates the gravity of the situation for Judah.²⁹

A second instance of the remnant in the context of judgment is found in what has been traditionally understood as Isaiah’s commission in 6:13. After receiving instruction to deaden the sensitivities of the people by his prophetic message, Isaiah cries out in despair, “How long, O YHWH?” (v. 11). The response hardly comforts the prophet, as YHWH conveys his intent to empty the cities of the land in judgment. As noted by every commentator on this passage, there exists a series of notoriously difficult text-critical and translation issues in this passage.³⁰ Though an exhaustive analysis is beyond the scope of the present article, I will attempt to frame an understanding of the passage focusing on the remnant motif. Though there is no explicit remnant *terminology* in this verse, justification for the its inclusion here will be provided below.

25. The adjective מעט is missing from LXX, Syriac, and Vulgate, leading some contemporary scholars to excise it from the text. On a literary level, however, there appears no compelling reason for this decision. So Wildberger, *Isaiah 1–12*, 20; Hasel, *The Remnant*, 314.

26. The LXX translates שְׂרִיד as σπέρμα, possibly due to the influence of a similar phrase in Deuteronomy 3:3. The lexeme שְׂרִיד frequently has a positive function in the Latter Prophets, yet here is used negatively in context. See Hasel, *The Remnant*, 314–15.

27. Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah*, 44; Kaiser, *Isaiah 1–12*, 10.

28. Contra Childs, *Isaiah*, 19.

29. This interpretation is supported further by the character quality of the remnant itself visible from the following verse (v. 10). Isaiah transitions from a description of judgment to directly address the leaders of the very remnant that was spared, calling them “chiefs of Sodom.” In this fashion, Isaiah states that though the remnant had not suffered the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah in total destruction, their character and practices are no less abominable (v. 13). With such a picture of the remnant community, one can hardly miss the negative literary function of the motif in the opening chapter.

30. For a concise summary and evaluation, see Jan de Waard, *A Handbook on Isaiah* (Textual Criticism and the Translator; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1997), 1:29–31.

The first line of the passage, ויעוד בה עשרייה, is generally translated as a conditional clause (“And if there is still a tenth in it”),³¹ followed by the more difficult ושובה והיתה לבער. This latter phrase, translated “and it will again be consumed,” utilizes שוב as an auxiliary verb, expressing the manner of action described by the final two words.³² The translation of בער historically has proved problematic for commentators. The usual sense of the word, “to burn,” does not appear to make the best sense of the context, as no fire is mentioned or implied. Some have aligned their translation with various ancient versions, such as Symmachus’s “for grazing” (εἰς καταβοσκησιν),³³ but the rendering here of “consumed” better fits the present context, functioning similarly to the verb in 3:14.³⁴

Together, these two lines describe a group remaining after an enemy attack, yet those who survive do so only to be consumed by more violence. The remnant concept implicit here would seem to indicate a remnant destined for future destruction. If the translation adopted here is correct, the negative implications of the motif cannot be missed. As Clements aptly states, “In spite of the textual difficulties, and the lack of a completely satisfactory resolution of them, it is evident that the metaphor is one expressing threat.”³⁵

Greg Beale, sharing this conclusion, argues for a negative understanding of the remnant motif, as itself an indictment of idolatry.³⁶ Anticipating objections regarding the “holy seed” of v. 13e, Beale

31. J. A. Emerton, “The Translation and Interpretation of Isaiah vi. 13,” in *Interpreting the Hebrew Bible: Essays in Honour of E. I. J. Rosenthal* (ed. J. A. Emerton and S. C. Reif; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 86. Hasel (*The Remnant*, 239) states, “In Isaiah, however, the idea of the tenth contains no positive aspect. It has the character of a threat.”

32. Gregory K. Beale, “Isaiah 6:9–13: A Retributive Taunt Against Idolatry,” *VT* 41 (1991): 259; Emerton, “The Translation and Interpretation of Isaiah Vi. 13,” 86. Emerton rejects the interpretation of שבה as indicative of some form of repentance, functioning rather as a complementary unit. See *Ibid.*, 115.

33. So Wildberger, *Isaiah 1–12*, 251. The Vulgate’s reading of “make plain” is likely based on the reading באר rather than בער.

34. Hasel, *The Remnant*, 235. Watts views the first two clauses (13a–b) as continuing the speech of the prophet, with a switch to YHWH as speaker in the third. He renders 13a–b as a questions: “if (perchance there be) yet in it a tenth-part, if it turn, will it be for burning?” (Watts, *Isaiah 1–33*, 68).

35. Clements, *Isaiah 1–39*, 78.

36. More specifically, Beale states that the idolatry of Israel functions as a “metonymy representing the whole of the nation’s covenantal disobedience” (Beale, “Isaiah 6:9–13,” 257).

presents a series of alternatives to a positive reading of this text. He notes that the ordinary use of the term *מצבת* represents a pillar, whether cultic or commemorative, making the common translation of “stump” unlikely.³⁷ What Isaiah is told, according to Beale, is that idolatrous Israel will be made deaf and dumb like their objects of worship. Those who remain will resemble their idols. Thus, destruction is the only fate for such a people. Beale concludes, “Therefore, Isaiah uses the remnant idea in both v. 13a and v. 13b not positively but negatively in order to emphasize the magnitude and absoluteness of Israel’s judgment.”³⁸

Though I am not persuaded by some of Beale’s broader conclusions on this text, he rightly understands the negative use of the remnant motif. Yet even if Beale’s analysis is rejected, at the very least a contrast would be established between the remnant as an indication of judgment (v. 13a–b) and one of hope (v. 13e). In either case v. 13a–b would present the remnant motif as a negative literary feature.

The final use of the remnant motif as a negative literary feature is Isa 10:22. Framed by another formula *ביום ההוא* (v. 20), what begins as a positive use of the remnant motif as blessing for Judah (vv. 20–21) is suddenly darkened by the grave declaration of ruin. With an almost seamless transition from an allusion to the blessing of the Abrahamic covenant, Isaiah decrees devastation for Israel with only a remnant (*שאר*) remaining.³⁹ Together, these verses exhibit an A-B-A-B pattern.

A: a small, faithful remnant trusts YHWH (v. 20)

B: a positive use of the remnant—the people’s future is secure in YHWH (v. 21)

37. Ibid., 268. Contra Dale W. Manor, “Massebah,” in *Anchor Bible Dictionary* (ed. David Noel Freedman; New York: Doubleday, 1992). The phrase itself is omitted from LXX and the Old Latin, causing some to label it a later gloss. Emerton, who is among those who reject the phrase’s originality, views a similar phrase in Ezra 9:2 as an indication of a post-exilic setting for the gloss. Yet Hasel has effectively argued how the phrase’s occurrence in 1QIsa^a attests to its antiquity. See Emerton, “The Translation and Interpretation of Isaiah vi. 13,” 114; Hasel, *The Remnant*, 237.

38. Beale, “Isaiah 6:9–13,” 271.

39. The *אם כי* construction at the beginning of verse 22 functions to introduce a concessive clause, contrasting the large number of Israelites at present with the small remnant that will return in the future. A conditional sense is syntactically possible for the construction, as in the confirmation of an oath, but the negative context of the oracle stands against this reading. Contra Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah*, 117. See Christo H. J. van der Merwe, Jackie A. Naudé, and Jan H. Kroeze, *A Biblical Hebrew Reference Grammar* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), §40.5.2.

A': a large, (presumably unfaithful) remnant (v. 22a)

B': a negative use of the remnant—destruction lays hold of the majority of the people with only a meager remnant remaining (v. 22b)

The oscillation between salvation and judgment here may have a specific literary purpose, namely, to prevent any misunderstanding of YHWH's promise of prosperity.⁴⁰ Here, the remnant motif functions to warn against an unwarranted breed of nationalism. Isaiah makes clear that mere inclusion in the people of Israel is not an unconditional guarantee of safety, but faith and obedience are required. Thus, the progression of thought in 10:22 moves from promise to a sober reality of judgment for those who forsake YHWH while trusting unequivocally in their identity as members of the covenant.⁴¹

If the above analysis is correct, these three texts present the remnant motif as an indication of the judgment that will meet Judah. The motif provides an apt picture of the small population left after destruction, in some cases destined for further harm. While the presence of the remnant may imply the merciful character of YHWH in some of these verses, the primary literary function appears to depict the near hopelessness of those left alive. The moral character of the remnant, in some contexts, clarifies the warrant for this divine retribution. Only the most vivid of pictures could communicate the severity of Judah's situation, and for Isaiah, the remnant motif is well suited for this task.

THE REMNANT MOTIF IN PROPHETIC NARRATIVE

The second category of the remnant motif is found in the two prophetic narrative units (7:1–25; 36:1–37:38). Here, the literary function of the remnant reveals the prophetic perspective of Israel's leadership, contrasting the reigns of Ahaz and Hezekiah as negative and positive examples of kingship respectively.

40. So Hasel, *The Remnant*, 329.

41. Oswalt (*Book of Isaiah*, 1:271) rejects any abrogation of the Abrahamic covenant but states that the passage is a warning against trusting in one's identity as an Israelite. Though the mention of the remnant shows again the mercy of YHWH in sparing some of the people, the primary focus appears to be on the destruction that will occur. Contra Graham, "The Remnant Motif in Isaiah," 223.

The parallels between the two sections themselves can hardly be missed.⁴² Both narratives, set in the context of the threat of invasion by foreign armies, occur in the same location—“the conduit of the upper pool on the highway to the Washer’s Field” (7:3; 36:2). This location is referenced only in these two narratives and in the parallel account of chapter 36 in 2 Kgs 18. Furthermore, the progression of events establishes an obvious parallel as the report of the mounting threat provokes great anxiety in both kings, followed by signs of reassurance and the command of YHWH not to fear mediated through the prophet Isaiah. That the two literary units were intended to in some way parallel one another is clear, yet, the dissimilarities form an equally significant relationship.

While both narratives follow the same order of events, moving from crisis to promise, promise to sign, sign to response, the details in each narrative are in tension. Whereas in chapter 7 YHWH sends the prophet Isaiah to speak words of *comfort* to King Ahaz near the Washer’s field in response to the military threat, the contrasting narrative (36–37) describes the king of Assyria sending his emissary, the Rabshakeh, to speak words of *threat* at the Washer’s field. Furthermore, Ahaz’s unbelief in rejecting the request for a sign (7:12) is contrasted with the silence of doubt in the Hezekiah narrative.⁴³ Together, the narratives present two models of leadership in Judah: one that rejects the covenant promises of YHWH and one that exhibits trust in the God of Israel. It is in the context of this contrast that the literary function of the remnant motif emerges.

Isaiah 7:3, 21

The remnant motif makes a two-fold appearance in chapter 7, both following the report of the coalition of Syria and the northern kingdom of Israel—an event that causes both the king and the nation of Judah to tremble like trees in the wind (v. 2). In response, the prophet Isaiah is instructed to assure the king that YHWH will indeed deliver the people by the use of a foreign military power. Almost in passing, Isaiah is

42. These observations are succinctly summarized in Edgar W. Conrad, “The Royal Narratives and the Structure of the Book of Isaiah,” *JOT* 41 (1988): 68–70.

43. The contrasting characterization of Ahaz and Hezekiah is heightened by Isaiah’s omission of Hezekiah’s attempt to financially appease Sennacherib recorded in 2 Kgs 18:14–16. The result is a more positive portrayal of Hezekiah in this instance over against that of Ahaz. So P. R. Ackroyd, *Isaiah 36–39: Structure and Function* (SBTS 5; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1995), 493.

commanded to take along his son, שָׂאֵר יָשׁוּב (“a remnant will return”) (v. 3). This constitutes the first reference to Isaiah’s family in the book, who, as becomes clear later, prove to be significant in the prophet’s own ministry as signs for Israel (cf. 8:18).

While clearly Isaiah’s son contributes to the remnant theology of the book, the specific meaning of his name has posed some difficulty for interpreters.⁴⁴ Does the mention of a remnant reinforce the message of comfort to the king that a remnant will indeed return despite the threat to national security? Does the name imply the weight of a coming judgment, namely, that *only* a remnant will return after a devastating defeat? Or does the name pertain not to Israel itself but indicate that the enemy forces will be greatly diminished if they continue their advance? The immediate context of the passage provides no explicit answer to these questions. To complicate matters further, both the positive and negative use are found in proximity to this passage. In the case of 10:20–23, as argued above, both literary functions occur.

Yet, when set in the wider literary context, as well as in contrast to the Hezekiah narrative, the function of the name is clarified. It must be remembered that at this point in the literary world of chapter 7, Isaiah’s son was a young boy, indicating that his name did not originate in direct response to the Syro-Ephramite threat.⁴⁵ Furthermore, the prediction of a remnant during the time of peace prior to this event would have no functional positive connotation, unless destruction was already anticipated. Thus on a literary level, the mention of the remnant at the beginning of the narrative casts a negative light on the chapter, as it anticipates Ahaz’s rejection of YHWH’s assurance.⁴⁶

44. There have been various attempts to emend or offer alternative translations for the phrase, most of which have not gained a significant following. Though Roland de Vaux rightly appreciates the antiquity of remnant terminology, he incorrectly concludes that its meaning is self-evident, needing no explanation. See Roland de Vaux, *The Bible and the Ancient Near East* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971), 19. As argued here, there could be either a positive or negative sense intended in his name. For a defense of the traditional rendering of this phrase, see Gerhard F. Hasel, “Linguistic Considerations Regarding the Translation of Isaiah’s Shear-Jashub: A Reassessment,” *AUSS* 9 (1971): 36–46.

45. See the thesis by Johan M. Lundberg “Refugees, Survivors and a Community Saved and Refashioned through Judgement: The Remnant in Isaiah, Micah and Zephaniah,” (M.A. thesis, MF Norwegian School of Theology, 2011, 18). Oswalt places the events of chapter 7 subsequent to Ahaz’s defeat by the Syro-Ephramite league. What Ahaz now dreads, according to Oswalt, is total annihilation. Yet, this conclusion is not apparent to me in the text. See Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah*, 1:200.

46. While it is true that verse 10 indicates a new unit in the literary progression of the chapter, it must not be separated from the preceding verses. In fact, the intelligibility of

The second mention of the remnant in Isa 7 occurs in the context of the sign of Immanuel (vv. 10–25). This passage furthers the interpretation argued in this article. Verses 18–25 contain four ביום ההוא (“on that Day”) statements, describing YHWH’s purpose to summon Assyria to overtake the land. This invasion serves to realize the judgment portended by Isaiah’s son at the beginning of the chapter. While the first two statements are generally recognized as oracles of judgment, the latter two present some interpretive difficulty. Do these verses continue the description of judgment?⁴⁷ Or do they shift to a positive note of prosperity?⁴⁸

The crux of the debate falls on the interpretation of verses 21–22. A question raised is whether the mention of curds and honey is an inner-biblical allusion to the glorious land promised to the exodus generation (Exod 3:8; 13:5; Num 13:27). Or does it betray an expectation of a deserted land that reflects the national poverty of Judah? In the larger context of judgment, the latter seems to be more plausible.⁴⁹ When all four oracles are taken together, the picture delineates a land that is so desolate from war that the livestock have endless plains to graze with no local populations to interfere. What was once thriving farmland is now only fit for grazing.⁵⁰ Though the imagery of curds and honey can itself

the section as a whole is conceptually dependent on the connection between the two units (1–9, 10ff.). See Stuart A. Irvine, *Isaiah, Ahaz, and the Syro-Ephraimitic Crisis* (SBLDS 123; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990), 159. Irvine rejects the notion that verses 10–17 circulated as an independent oracle, contra Josef Schreiner, *Segen für die Völker. Gesammelte Schriften zur Entstehung und Theologie des Alten Testaments*, ed. Erich Zenger (Würzburg: Echter, 1987), 65–71. Wildberger (Wildberger, *Isaiah 1–12*, 320–21), who views v. 17 as a climactic conclusion to vv. 1–17, segments vv. 18–25 from the rest of the chapter as a weakened expansion of v. 17.

47. So Alison Lo, “Remnant Motif in Amos, Micah, and Zephaniah,” in *A God of Faithfulness: Essays in Honour of J. Gordon McConville on His 60th Birthday* (ed. Jamie A. Grant, Alison Lo, and Gordon J. Wenham; New York: T&T Clark, 2011), 130–48. Oswalt (*The Book of Isaiah*, 1:218) primarily understands the reference as negative but does not see the need to deny a positive element.

48. Childs, *Isaiah*, 68; Christopher R. Seitz, *Isaiah 1–39* (Interpretation; Louisville: John Knox, 1993), 80; and William McKane, “The Interpretation of Isaiah VII 14–25,” *VT* 17 (1967), 216. Blenkinsopp views the ambiguity of the unit as the result of a later redactional setting reflecting on the Syro-Ephraimite threat. See Joseph Blenkinsopp, *A History of Prophecy in Israel* (rev. ed.; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996), 102.

49. Smith, *Isaiah 1–39*, 218; Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 1–39*, 236; Watts, *Isaiah 1–33*, 145.

50. Edward J. Young, *The Book of Isaiah: The English Text, with Introduction, Exposition, and Notes*, 2nd ed., vol. 1 (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 298.

function both in positive and negative contexts, much like the remnant motif, here it is presented negatively.⁵¹ All four ביום ההוא statements thus come together to magnify the coming judgment, furthering the message proclaimed in verses 1–9. Isaiah prophesies a desolate land to demonstrate the Ahaz's folly in distrusting YHWH.

An objection may be raised at this point against a negative interpretation of the chapter that Isaiah's mission is to prophesy the failure of the Syro-Ephramite league, thus offering protection and security for Ahaz. According to this reading, the remnant would accompany the message of hope as the prophet strengthens and encourages the king. Yet, in addition to the points above, the mention of the remnant in this specific context could hardly afford any meaningful comfort. For, the means of disbanding the Syro-Ephramite league is the Assyrian army foretold in the second unit (v. 17ff). Although the nation would provide relief from the imminent threat, they would bring unimaginable destruction upon the land beyond any threat posed by the coalition. Israel, to borrow a metaphor, would escape a lion only to encounter a bear. And as Sheldon Blank states, "Only a remnant can find reassurance in the thought that it is such a remnant."⁵² The contextual data thus lends weight to the remnant used in a negative context as an indication of judgment.⁵³ The faithless response of Ahaz further supports this negative interpretation, standing as the antithesis of the positive characterization of Hezekiah.

Isaiah 37:4, 31–32

Nearly 30 years after the collapse of the Syro-Ephramite coalition, Judah faced the threat of annihilation yet again, but now at the hands of its former deliverer, Assyria. Known for their military ferocity and efficiency, the nation of Assyria claimed a sweeping victory over much of the Near East, reaching into the land of Judah (Isa 36:1). Unlike previous campaigns, Assyria came not to gather tribute of subjugated

51. For a survey of the this imagery with similar conclusions, see Etan Levine, "The Land of Milk and Honey," *JSOT* 87 (2000): 43–57. Also, See Nogah Hareuveni, *Nature in Our Biblical Heritage* (trans. Helen Frenkley; Kiryat Ono, Israel: Neot Kedumim, 1980), 11–22. I am thankful to Sam Emadi for directing my attention to this latter reference.

52. Sheldon H. Blank, "The Current Misinterpretation of Isaiah's *She'ar Yashub*," *JBL* 67 (1948), 215. Contra Irvine, *Isaiah, Ahaz, and the Syro-Ephraimitic Crisis*, 146.

53. So Hasel, *The Remnant*, 289.

nations, but to exert total conquest.⁵⁴ With the ascendancy of a new king of Assyria, Hezekiah saw an opportunity to sever ties with the nation (cf. 36:4–5). Yet such insubordination would not likely go unpunished. Thus, Sennacherib’s army marched against Jerusalem, an event recorded in Isa 36–37.⁵⁵

Sennacherib, through the mediation of his official, the Rabshakeh, called for the surrender of the city in the hearing of the people (36:2–20). Composed of both threat and promise, the Rabshakeh launches a compelling ploy of psychological warfare to make surrender appear the most preferable option.⁵⁶ Reminding the city of Assyria’s military success, coupled with the futility of relying on their allies, the Rabshakeh warns against trusting Hezekiah. For, the removal of cultic sites could hardly gain the favor of their national deity. What the Rabshakeh offers, in essence, is a new Solomonic reign of safety and prosperity under the lordship of the king of Assyria (cf. 1 Kgs 4:25). On a natural level, capitulation to Sennacherib was indeed logical, yet Hezekiah’s devotion to YHWH precluded such a response.

The first occurrence of the remnant motif in this passage is found in Hezekiah’s appeal to Isaiah the prophet for intercession (37:2–4). In the final clause of his request, Hezekiah says, “lift up your prayer for the remnant [השאריִת] that is left” (37:4f–g).⁵⁷ The function of the remnant motif here, though clearly referencing the current population in Jeru-

54. John Bright, *History of Israel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000), 271.

55. The relationship between this narrative section and the parallel account in 2 Kgs 18:13–19:37 remains a contentious issue. Yet, a shift has taken place in scholarship away from a view of Isaiah’s borrowing source material from 2 Kings, to the priority of the Isaianic text. See K. A. D. Smelik, “Distortion of Old Testament Prophecy: The Purpose of Isaiah Xxxvi and Xxxvii,” in *Crises and Perspectives: Studies in Ancient Near Eastern Polytheism, Biblical Theology, Palestinian Archaeology and Intertestamental Literature* (OtSt 24; Leiden: Brill, 1986), 70–106; Christopher R. Seitz, *Zion’s Final Destiny: The Development of the Book of Isaiah: A Reassessment of Isaiah 36–39* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 47–61. Contra Ronald E. Clements, *Old Testament Prophecy: From Oracles to Canon* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996), 39.

56. Cf. Aarnoud van der Deijl, *Protest or Propaganda: War in the Old Testament Book of Kings and in Contemporaneous Ancient Near Eastern Texts* (SSN 51; Leiden: Brill, 2008), 243.

57. Following 1QIsa^a, Watts adopts the reading, “those found in this city” for the conclusion of the verse. See John D. W. Watts, *Isaiah 34–66* (WBC; Dallas: Word, 1987), 32. Surprisingly, Hasel omits discussion of this text in his study.

salem,⁵⁸ is not immediately discernible. This plea could either express a positive expectation of hope (i.e., “YHWH has left a remnant to this point, he will certainly deliver us now”), or a desperate cry of despair (i.e., “The destruction Assyria has dealt is so severe that *only* a remnant is left in the land”)? Those who immediately label this passage as a positive feature of the plea do not fully appreciate the complexity of the motif itself as shown in this study.⁵⁹ As this mention of the remnant awaits a further resolution, it is best to delay interpretation until this complexity is examined.⁶⁰

The clarifying text does indeed occur in the prophet’s extended response to Hezekiah’s second appeal (37:21–35). The text asserts YHWH’s sovereignty over Sennacherib’s military conquests. For before Sennacherib had planned his offensive strategy, YHWH had already determined the path of his victory (v. 26). As the one who establishes success in battle, YHWH states his purpose to turn away the threat against Jerusalem and lead Sennacherib away with a hook in his nose and a bit in his mouth (v. 29). Following his address regarding the king of Assyria, YHWH provides a sign for Hezekiah in verse 30, though lacking the miraculous luster one may expect. For two years the city would live off the produce of the land, followed by a year of the normal agricultural cycle. Though this sign may appear quite ordinary, it is upon this guarantee that YHWH pledges a “surviving remnant of the house of Judah [פליטת בית יהודה הנשארה] shall again take root downward and bear fruit upward” (v. 31).

Here in the context of YHWH’s promise to prosper the city, the pairing of פליטת and שאר forms a more developed picture of the remnant motif as an indication of blessing. It is interesting to note that in verse 31 the remnant itself is bearing fruit and not simply eating the fruit that had previously grown (v. 30f). Thus Hezekiah is told that YHWH, who will sustain the inhabitants of Jerusalem with the produce of the land, will further plant the remnant as a tree that bears fruit in due time. The combined imagery of roots established in the earth together with the bountiful produce of the vine show the remnant as secure and healthy.

58. Oswalt (*The Book of Isaiah*, 1:647) inserts the word “here” at the conclusion of the passage to clarify this point.

59. Willem A. M. Beuken, *Isaiah II* (trans. Brian Doyle; HCOT; Leuven: Peeters, 2000), 358; Smith, *Isaiah 1–39*, 611. Delitzsch (*Isaiah*, 2:93) proposes an unusual interpretation of the motif as establishing a comparison between the sturdy faith of the prophet and the weak faith of the king. Yet, as will be argued, the positive portrayal of Hezekiah stands against this conclusion.

60. So Seitz, *Isaiah 1–39*, 249.

Unlike the vineyard that yielded wild grapes in chapter five, the remnant shall once again be fruitful.

Isaiah makes a further comment securing the blessing pronounced by YHWH in verse 32, once again utilizing a relevant word pair. The verse, opening with a כִּי conjunction, reasserts the reality of YHWH's promise: a remnant will emerge from Jerusalem. Isaiah declares, "For out of Jerusalem shall go a remnant [שְׂאֲרִית], and survivors [פְּלִיטָה] from Mount Zion" (v. 31a–b).⁶¹ The chiasmic construction brackets the remnant lexemes with references to the Holy city. The livelihood of the city is thus linked to the livelihood of the people.⁶² In this context, Isaiah uses the remnant motif as an illustration of YHWH's protection and beneficence in response to Hezekiah's faith, which stands in contrast with the negative characterization of Ahaz.⁶³

As seen in the narrative texts, Isaiah employs the remnant motif as a literary indicator of the monarchial climate in Judah. When used alongside of a faithless king such as Ahaz, the motif can indicate the severity of judgment that will be brought upon the people. Yet, standing in juxtaposition, the remnant can also display YHWH's purpose to preserve and prosper his people as witness with the faithful Hezekiah. The same literary duality that is evident in the prophetic oracles of the book is also present in the prophetic narrative units.

THE REMNANT IN NEW TESTAMENT THEOLOGY

For Christian readers of Scripture, the above understanding of the remnant motif is integral to the interpretation of various New Testament passages (e.g., Matt 24:40–41; Rom 11:5; Rev 11:13). Some of

61. Though Hasel views this verse as introducing an eschatological remnant emerging from the historical remnant of the previous verse, such an interpretation does not seem likely for two reasons. First, the conjunction need not be understood as indicating a result as Hasel implicitly argues. More likely, the כִּי functions assertively, further supporting the promise of YHWH following the sign. Second, Hasel's interpretation fails to view verse 32 in light of YHWH's response to Hezekiah, who asked not for the guarantee of an eschatological remnant, but deliverance of the *current* population. Hence, both verses conjoin to give hope for the inhabitants of Jerusalem at the time of Hezekiah's request as a secure remnant community is announced.

62. As Oswalt (*The Book of Isaiah*, 1:666) states, "if the remnant in Judah is once more to fill the land, then only one outcome is possible—Assyria will not be permitted to enter the city."

63. Lundberg ("Refugees, Survivors and a Community," 34) argues for a neutral interpretation of the remnant motif in chapter 37, yet his analysis misses the contrast between Ahaz and Hezekiah.

these texts clearly bear the marks of a positive literary function of the remnant, while others would seem to retain the negative sense. It is beyond the scope of this article, however, to pursue a thorough analysis of this motif in the New Testament. Thus, Paul's use of Isaiah in Rom 9 will illustrate this point. In Rom 9:27 and 29 Paul cites two texts from Isaiah to support his argument for the continuing faithfulness of God in relation to national Israel. God's promise, says Paul, has not failed, although only a small number of Jews believe. At this point, Paul references Isa 10:22–23 (v. 27) and 1:9 (v. 29) to show that the scant population of ethnic Israelites is not an unprecedented phenomenon. The degree to which Paul intends hope for future national Israel does not concern us here, but rather the hermeneutical presupposition of the interpreter when approaching Paul's use of these texts.⁶⁴

In an article on this passage, John Paul Heil “proposes a much more positive reading of Romans 9:27–29 than is usual.”⁶⁵ The remnant motif in both the MT and LXX, he claims, is used “as an expression not of a destruction diminishing Israel to ‘only’ a remnant, but of hope for the future represented by a remnant that will surely issue from Israel.”⁶⁶ While his conclusion about hope for future Israel, in and of itself, is not my contention, it stems here from a misunderstanding of the two-fold dimension of the remnant motif in the Hebrew text of Isaiah.⁶⁷ For how can the promise to Abraham coexist with a message of judgment? As argued above, the remnant in this passage may stand as a warning against faithless nationalism.

64. The LXX of Isa 10:22, which reads *καὶ ἐὰν γένηται ὁ λαὸς Ἰσραὴλ ὡς ἡ ἄμμος τῆς θαλάσσης, τὸ κατάλειμμα αὐτῶν σωθήσεται*, attests to an early interpretation of the motif. Whereas the MT emphasizes the negative sense, the LXX pronounces the salvation of the remnant. Paul's use of Isaiah in Romans is based on the LXX. What concerns us here is not Paul's appropriation of the LXX text as much as the presupposition of the interpreter in reference to the MT. As will be seen, some interpreters conflate the meaning of the LXX and MT when discussing the remnant. While the ultimate interpretation of Romans 9 may vary little on this basis, this article calls for a more nuanced discussion of the Hebrew text.

65. John Paul Heil, “From Remnant to Seed of Hope for Israel: Romans 9:27–29,” *CBQ* 64, no. 4 (2002): 703.

66. *Ibid.*, 710. He also maintains that the destruction announced in Isa 10:22 is directed toward Assyria, not Israel.

67. A similar critique is made by David Ian Starling, *Not My People: Gentiles as Exiles in Pauline Hermeneutics* (BZNW 184; Berlin: De Gruyter, 2011), 117 n. 36.

A more nuanced analysis of Paul's use of Isaiah is by Mark Seifrid.⁶⁸ He concludes that Paul uses Isaiah typologically to describe the restoration of the remnant. While acknowledging the negative overtones of the Isaianic text,⁶⁹ he nevertheless conflates the two senses of the motif in Isa 10:20–21 and 22. For example, regarding verse 22 he states, "In its context in the Hebrew Scriptures the statement undoubtedly promises the salvation of the remnant in the 'righteous overflow' of destruction."⁷⁰ Regarding the use of Isa 1:9 in Rom 9:29, Seifrid states, "This rendering takes up the Isaianic theology of the remnant, which portends the restoration of the entire nation."⁷¹ Yet a proper understanding of the remnant theology of Isaiah must take into account both the positive and negative senses.

When assessed in context, the negative sense of the Isaianic passages employed in Rom 9 cannot be dismissed, though, as has been frequently stated in this article, that does not wholly exclude positive implications.⁷² As this study has argued, these texts originally served as indications of judgment on the people of Judah. If the present analysis is correct, both Heil and Seifrid's methodological procedures exclude a central component of Isaiah's proclamation.⁷³

68. Mark Seifrid, "Romans," in *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (ed. Greg K. Beale and D. A. Carson; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 649.

69. He states, "In the Hoseanic context the language refers to the restoration of Israel after judgment; in the Isaianic setting it describes the nation, which, despite its numbers, will come under divine judgment" (ibid.).

70. Ibid.

71. Ibid., 650. Fitzmyer makes a similar statement: "The preservation of even a remnant is a manifestation of grace." See Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *Romans: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 33; New York: Doubleday, 1993), 575.

72. Moo rightly balances these aspects stating, "Characteristic especially of the prophets, the remnant doctrine contains both a word of judgment and a word of hope." He later concludes, "For Paul also, then, the remnant doctrine confirms his word of judgment to Israel: it is 'not all who are of Israel who are truly Israel.'" See Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 615.

73. J. Ross Wagner also follows similar methodology to Heil, stating, "The 'remnant' spoken of by Isaiah does not refer to barren survivors destined to die off one by one . . . , but to seed that will germinate, sprout, and blossom into a renewed Israel." See J. Ross Wagner, *Heralds of the Good News: Isaiah and Paul in Concert in the Letter to the Romans* (NovTSup; Leiden: Brill, 2003), 116; also see J. Ross Wagner, "Isaiah in Romans and Galatians," in *Isaiah in the New Testament: The New Testament and the Scriptures of Israel*, (ed. Steve Moyise and Maarten J. J. Menken; London: T&T Clark, 2005), 120–21. Seifrid ("Romans," 650) cites Wagner favorably on this text. Though

CONCLUSION

This article has argued that the book of Isaiah makes use of a two-fold literary function of the remnant motif, both as an indication of the severity of judgment for Judah and the nations as well as a picture of blessing for Judah. On a literary level, these two aspects dovetail to serve Isaiah's message of the reality of judgment for sin, and hope beyond judgment. Though every occurrence has its own particularities, the remnant motif operates along these parallel paths.

While Isaiah presents a robust use of the motif, other books in the Hebrew Bible certainly contribute to a fuller understanding. Since Hasel's monograph, published in 1974, to my knowledge there has not been a comprehensive analysis of the remnant motif. As Hasel's work itself is marked by issues of its time (e.g., diachronic concerns), a fresh literary analysis would be a welcomed addition. Especially since Hasel's analysis concluded with Isaiah, further research could bridge the motif to the rest of other prophetic books.

The hermeneutical significance of the motif has implications for both the interpretation of Isaiah and other OT books, as well as the New Testament. The neglect of either literary aspect of the remnant, whether positive or negative, can have far-reaching implications in the study of the Hebrew Bible and biblical theology. While the two-fold use of the motif in Isaiah seems clear, further research must bear out its use elsewhere.

Thomas Schreiner has a more positive view of the remnant, he acknowledges the possibility of a negative interpretation. See Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans* (BECNT; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 529.