6. The Letter-Prayer of Hezekiah in Isaiah 38—Logotechnical Analysis

Guidelines

- Please read the General Introduction and the Introduction to the Embedded Hymns.
- For common features found in the numerical analysis chart, see the "Key to the charts".

Isaiah 38:9-20 in its Literary Context

The Prayer of Hezekiah is a unique phenomenon in the book of Isaiah, not only because of its appearance here, but also as regards its exceptional form, being a letter-prayer. It does not feature in the account in 2 Kings 20, where one would have expected it, and it is highly improbable that it was transferred from an earlier version of Kings to its present context. Therefore, there must have been good reasons for its appearance in the book of Isaiah.

Contrary to the prevalent opinion among biblical scholars asserting that the prayer was imported from somewhere and inserted into the book of Isaiah, I shall argue that it was specifically composed by the editors of the book Isaiah (or perhaps heavily reworked and adapted, if it was an existent poem) to play its role in its present context.

My analysis of chapter 38 proved to be very helpful in discovering the reason why the editors of the book of Isaiah incorporated a whole passage from the Deuteronomistic History, 2 Kings 18:13-20:19, and what prompted them to accommodate a prayer of Hezekiah as well. Moreover, it provided incontestable logotechnical evidence strongly suggesting that the prayer and its surrounding framework constitute a well-planned compositional unity.

An important motive behind the editors' decisions may have been to portray Hezekiah as a particularly devout king who demonstrated his unshakeable trust in Yahweh throughout the Assyrian crisis and during his illness. To this end they cited the whole story from 2 Kings about the Assyrian threat and Hezekiah's illness telling how the chief officer tried to persuade Hezekiah *not to put his trust in Yahweh* (36:1-22), and how the king went to *the house of Yahweh* (37:1) to pray, and how he took *the letter* (37:14) from the Assyrian messengers, 'spread it out before Yahweh' and prayed again, which resulted in the assurance given by Isaiah that Yahweh would shield the city for his own sake and for the sake of *David* (37:35).

They also made a shortened version (chapter 38:1-8 + 21-22) of the story in 2 Kings 20:1-11, the account of Hezekiah's mortal illness and how he turned to Yahweh in his anguish, who promised him to add fifteen years to his life and to deliver him and his city from the king of Assyria, giving him *a sign* as proof of the fulfilment of the promise (the shadow going back *ten* steps on the dial of Ahaz).

Within this heavily reworked narrative they embedded a new document, the prayer attributed to Hezekiah, by means of the well-known 'split-and-embed' technique. They dislodged the passage about Isaiah's fig plaster (38:21) and deferred it to make room for the prayer. Then they rephrased the 2 Kings version of Hezekiah's request for a sign and added it to v. 21, which means that vs. 21-22 then functions as a device for conclusion in the form of a flashback or a recapitulation of the gist of the preceding story:[1]

> Isaiah had said: "Let them take a fig plaster and apply it to the boil, that he may recover."
> And Hezekiah had said: "What is the sign that I shall go up to the house of Yahweh?"

Additionally, by positioning Hezekiah's prayer in the story *after* his recovery, they gave it its appropriate function: as a song of thanksgiving.

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[1] For a similar recapitulation, compare the function of Exod. 15:19 after the embedding of the Song at the Reed Sea, and Deut. 32:44 after the embedding of the Song of Moses. In light of this embedding technique, there is absolutely no need to remove these two verses to their original place (cf. e.g., the Revised English Bible).

For the understanding of the motives leading to the embedding of the prayer, it is important to direct attention to key-words in the narrative, which show the close interrelation between the narrative and the prayer. E.g., the specific mention of *the house of Yahweh* in 37:1, 14, and 31 in the narrative, and in 38:20 and 22 in the prayer. Another key-idea is the reference to 'writer', 'writing', and 'letter', which may also have prompted the editors to compose the prayer in the form they present it (in 38:9): as a *writing* or a *letter* (מִכְתָּב).[2]

In the passage imported from 2 Kings, Shebna '*the writer*' is mentioned three times as a member of the Judean delegation (36:3, 22, and 37:2), and *letters* (סְפָרִים) play an important role in the communications between the foreign delegations and the king (37:14 and 39:1). Therefore, I consider it very likely that this is why the editors called Hezekiah's prayer a *writing* (מִכְתָּב). They envisaged Hezekiah as presenting a prayer to Yahweh, in exactly the same way as he presented the Assyrian letter, which he 'spread out before Yahweh' (37:14). The prayer is evidently meant to be understood as a written document addressed to God, a letter-prayer, which Hezekiah presented to him after his recovery.[3]

Another reason for the editors to incorporate a prayer attributed to Hezekiah after his recovery is that it was a very logical thing to do in line with his earlier visit to the house of Yahweh (37:1) covered with sackcloth to show God his disposition, and his consultation with Isaiah to offer a prayer (37:4). And more importantly, it is in line with two earlier prayers: his *prayer* referred to in 37:14-20 and his *prayer* on hearing about the consequences of his mortal illness in 38:3. The extensive prayer in 38:9-20 is the continuation and high point of Hezekiah's praying, being his natural reaction to Yahweh's response and his promise to add fifteen years to his life. As noted above, this extra prayer the editors embedded in the narrative is in fact a song of praise and thanksgiving.

Returning to the motive behind the decision of the editors to incorporate the prose passage from 2 Kings dealing with the Assyrian threat into the book of Isaiah, I may point out another motive besides their intention to portray Hezekiah as a particularly devout king. They wanted to lay a link between the crisis faced by Hezekiah during the threat under the Assyrian king Sennacherib, described in Isa. 36-39, and the comparable threat faced by his father Ahaz during the so-called Syro-Ephraimite war dealt with in Isaiah 7:1-9:6.

The Immanuel passage, with its specific reference to the historical situation under Ahaz, was evidently their model in dealing with the Assyrian crisis and the precarious position of Hezekiah, which was greatly aggravated by his illness. To this end, they used the relevant account from 2 Kings and positioned it directly after Isaiah 35, which at that stage constituted the end of the book we know as Proto-Isaiah. Note the striking similarity between the messianic prophecy in Isaiah 9:1-6 and the messianic passage in Isaiah 35.

The similarities between the two historical episodes are likewise striking: in both cases, there is a *serious threat* from outside, both kings *consult with the prophet Isaiah*, both kings get an *assurance* from Yahweh that he will ward off the threat, both kings *receive a sign* as proof of God's promise. Moreover, in both passages *written documents* play a role (for the time of Ahaz, see Isa. 8:1, 16 and 20). And finally, in both passages there is explicit mention of their forefather *David*: in the Ahaz passage at the beginning (7:2) and at the end (9:6); in the Hezekiah passage: in 37:35 and 38:5.

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[2] Referring to Psalms 16 and 56-60 where we find מִכְתָּם, 'inscription', many commentators prefer this word (LXX has στηλογραφία) to the word מִכְתָּב in MT (cf. also Exod. 32:16, 39:30, Deut. 10:4, 2 Chron. 21:12, 35:4, and 36:22). However, this emendation is totally unnecessary.

[3] For a study on written communications between human beings and the godhead – and *vice versa* - in Mesopotamia and ancient Israel, see Sharon R. Keller, "Written Communications Between the Human and Divine Spheres in Mesopotamia and Israel", in: *The Biblical Canon in Comparative Perspective (Scripture in Context IV),* edited by K.L. Younger, Jr., W.W. Hallo, and B.F. Batto (Ancient Near Eastern Texts and Studies, Vol. 11), Lewiston / Queenston / Lampeter, 1991, pp. 299-313. She refers to Exod. 32:32-33; Job 31:35; Exod. 24:12; 31:18; 32:16; Ez. 3:1; Dan. 5:24; I Chron. 28:19; Exod. 25:9; 1 Sam. 10:25, and of course Isa. 38:9. See also W.W. Hallo, "Letters, Prayers, and Letter-Prayers", in: *Proceedings of the Seventh Worlk Congress of Jewish Studies* (Jerusalm 1981), pp. 17-27.

In addition to this, there is another reason for the link between the two episodes: the fact that Hezekiah is closely associated with Isaiah's famous *Immanuel prophecy* addressed to his father, king Ahaz, during the crisis caused by the Syro-Ephraimite war. Hezekiah plays a crucial role even before his birth, when Ahaz is invited to ask *a sign* from Yahweh that he may trust in his assurance that the plans of the enemies would not succeed. Then, of his own accord, Yahweh gives Ahaz a sign (7:14):

> *Look! The young woman is with child, and she will give birth to a son,*
> *And she will call his name Immanuel.*

There is no doubt in the mind of many scholars that the child in question is the unborn prince Hezekiah. As I have shown elsewhere, his name is numerically encoded in the passage in which the prophet elaborates on the Immanuel prophecy, Isa. 9:1-6. The elaboration contains a clear expression of the messianic expectations arising from the birth of the new prince.[4]

We may confidently conclude that the editors of the book of Isaiah had every reason to embed a special prayer ascribed to Hezekiah after he got the assurance that Yahweh would protect him and his city, and after his miraculous recovery form a mortal illness.

In passing, I may put forward a theory regarding the identity of the editors of the book of Isaiah. In my view, they are to be found among the wise persons in literary circles who occupied themselves with collecting and editing documents they deemed important. The best candidates by far would be 'The Men of Hezekiah' mentioned in the book of Proverbs as the 'transcribers' of more proverbs of Solomon (25:1). Besides this noble occupation they may also have 'transcribed' the sayings of the prophet Isaiah, collecting, copying, editing, and annotating them to constitute a full-scale book, Isaiah 1-39, which they transmitted. The special attention paid to Hezekiah in the book of Isaiah buttresses this theory.

Specific Features of Isaiah 38

- Despite its unique character in terms of content, the Prayer of Hezekiah displays several typical compositional features found in the Psalms: having a heading and a coda, the use of the change in the direction of address to mark the transitions in the structure of the text, the use of the same device to highlight the meaningful arithmetic centre of the poem, the use of the divine name numbers **17** and **26** for structural purposes and to weave them into the fabric of the text, and the use of the numerical value of an important word or name to give structure to the text.

- As in the Psalms, the heading falls outside the poetical body of the poem, being not part of its structure. Contrary to what we find in the Psalms, where the coda falls within the last strophe or canto, the coda here (v. 20) clearly stands apart as a kind of epilogue. For the use of a coda as a device for conclusion, see the General Introduction, p. 12.

- The poem is made up of 15 verselines (5 tricola and 10 bicola) divided into 2 cantos with 2 strophes each. The text as it stands in MT appears to be a meticulously designed numerical composition. The total number of words, 134, may have been determined by the numerical value of the second word in the heading, לְחִזְקִיָּהוּ, 'attributed to Hezekiah' 134 = 67 + 67. This supposition is buttressed by the fact that the text divides exactly into 67 words spoken about God and 67 addressed to him.

- The **60** words in Canto II, vs. 15-19, divide in terms of the *atnach* into **26** words before and **34** (2 x **17**) after, representing the numerical value of בֵּית יְהוָה, 'house of Yahweh'.

- The prayer has a distinct meaningful centre on word level containing the gist of the poem, v. 15a, *What can I say? He has spoken to me, and he is the One who has done it*. The meaningful centre is highlighted by the sudden change from words addressed to God in v. 14 to words spoken about him in v. 15. For this, consult the General Introduction, p. 9.

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[4] See my *Numerical Secrets of the Bible*, North Richland Hills, Texas, 2000, pp. 149-153.

- The preceding narrative, vs. 1-8, has a numerical structure of its own: its 123 words are divided into 72 before, and **51** (3 x **17**) after the *atnach.* Moreover, the **60**-word divine speech reflects precisely the structure of Canto II: 60 = **26** + **34**, or is it *vice versa*?
    - vs. 5-6   Yahweh's speaks in response to Hezekiah's prayer **34** (2 x **17**) words
    - vs. 7-8a   Yahweh reveals the sign which undergirds his promise **26** (**13+13**) words.

This clearly attests to the close interrelationship between the story and the poem, which is also demonstrated by the fact that the name YHWH occurs **7** times in the preceding narrative (vs. 1-8) and **3** times in the coda and the concluding narrative (vs. 20-22). The altogether **10** occurrences of YHWH were obviously deliberately designed to allude to the **10** steps on the dial of Ahaz. The name YHWH does not appear in the main body of the prayer, where other designations of God are used. See the last Observation below.

Strophic structure - Canto/Stanza/Part boundary: ||

- Labuschagne: 10-12, 13-14 || 15-16, 17-19 || coda, v. 20 (2 cantos with 4 strophes and a coda, with 15 verselines and 35 cola).
- M.L. Barré (2005, see Bibliography below): 10-11, 12-14 || 15-17, 18-19 || coda, v. 20 (2 parts, 4 strophes and a coda).

Logotechnical analysis

- Columns **a** and **b** show the number of words before and after the atnach.
- Column **c**: words spoken about God (67); Column **d**: words addressed to God (67).

		Total	a	b	c	d
9	מִכְתָּב לְחִזְקִיָּהוּ מֶלֶךְ־יְהוּדָה^	4	4		4	
	בַּחֲלֹתוֹ וַיְחִי מֵחָלְיוֹ:	3		3	3	
12+8+7+19+10+5+6 = 67 לְחִזְקִיָּהוּ = 67 Heading, v. 9		7	= 4	+ 3	= 7	+ 0
10 * See note below	אֲנִי אָמַרְתִּי	2	2		2	
	בִּדְמִי יָמַי אֵלֵכָה בְּשַׁעֲרֵי שְׁאוֹל^	5	5		5	
	פֻּקַּדְתִּי יֶתֶר שְׁנוֹתָי:	3		3	3	
11	אָמַרְתִּי לֹא־אֶרְאֶה יָהּ	4	4		4	
	יָהּ בְּאֶרֶץ הַחַיִּים^	3	3		3	
	לֹא־אַבִּיט אָדָם עוֹד	4		4	4	
	עִם־יוֹשְׁבֵי חָדֶל:	3		3	3	
12	דּוֹרִי נִסַּע וְנִגְלָה מִנִּי כְּאֹהֶל רֹעִי^	6	6		6	
	קִפַּדְתִּי כָאֹרֵג חַיַּי	3		3	3	
5	מִדַּלָּה יְבַצְּעֵנִי	2		2	2	
	מִיּוֹם עַד־לַיְלָה תַּשְׁלִימֵנִי:	4		4		4
Strophe 1 Total, v. 10-12		**39**	= 20	+ 19	= 35	+ 4
13	שִׁוִּיתִי עַד־בֹּקֶר	3	3			3
	כָּאֲרִי כֵּן יְשַׁבֵּר כָּל־עַצְמוֹתָי^	5	5		5	
	מִיּוֹם עַד־לַיְלָה תַּשְׁלִימֵנִי:	4		4		4
14	כְּסוּס עָגוּר כֵּן אֲצַפְצֵף	4	4			4
	אֶהְגֶּה כַּיּוֹנָה^	2	2			2
	דַּלּוּ עֵינַי לַמָּרוֹם	3		3		3
	אֲדֹנָי עָשְׁקָה־לִּי עָרְבֵנִי:	4		4		4
Strophe 2 Total, v. 13-14		25	= 14	+ 11	= 5	+ 20
Canto I Total, v. 10-14		**64**	= **34**	+ 30	= 40	+ 24

Label	Hebrew	v.	Total				
15 The Six	מָה־אֲדַבֵּר וְאָמַר־לִי וְהוּא עָשָׂה^	9	6	6		6	
Middle words	אֲדַדֶּה כָל־שְׁנוֹתַי עַל־מַר נַפְשִׁי:		6		6	6	
(134 = 64 + 6 + 64): Meaningful centre	v. 15		12	= 6	+ 6	= 12	+ 0
16	אֲדֹנָי עֲלֵיהֶם יִחְיוּ^	10	3	3			3
	וּלְכָל־בָּהֶן חַיֵּי רוּחִי		4		4		4
	וְתַחֲלִימֵנִי וְהַחֲיֵנִי:		2		2		2
	v. 16		9	= 3	+ 6	= 0	+ 9
	Strophe 3 Total, v. 15-16		21	= 9	+ 12	= 12	+ 9
	Total, v. 10-16		85	= 43	+ 42	= 52	+ 33
17	הִנֵּה לְשָׁלוֹם מַר־לִי מָר^	11	5	5		5	
	וְאַתָּה חָשַׁקְתָּ נַפְשִׁי מִשַּׁחַת בְּלִי		5		5		5
	כִּי הִשְׁלַכְתָּ אַחֲרֵי גֵוְךָ כָּל־חֲטָאָי:		6		6		6
18	כִּי לֹא שְׁאוֹל תּוֹדֶךָּ	12	4	4			4
	מָוֶת יְהַלְלֶךָּ^		2	2			2
	לֹא־יְשַׂבְּרוּ יוֹרְדֵי־בוֹר	13	4		4		4
	אֶל־אֲמִתֶּךָ:		2		2		2
19	חַי חַי הוּא יוֹדֶךָ כָּמוֹנִי הַיּוֹם^	14	6	6			6
	אָב לְבָנִים יוֹדִיעַ אֶל־אֲמִתֶּךָ:		5		5		5
	Strophe 4 Total, v. 17-19		39	= 17	+ 22	= 5	+ 34
בֵּית יְהוָה = 34 + 26 Canto II, v. 15-19			60	= 26	+ 34	= 17	+ 43
See vs. 20 and 22b Total, v. 10-19			124	= 60	+ 64	= 57	+ 67
20 Coda	יְהוָה לְהוֹשִׁיעֵנִי^	15	2	2		2	
	וּנְגִנוֹתַי נְנַגֵּן		2		2	2	
	כָּל־יְמֵי חַיֵּינוּ עַל־בֵּית יְהוָה:		6		6	6	
בֵּית יְהוָה = 34 + 26 Total, v. 20			10	= 2	+ 8	= 10	+ 0
לְחִזְקִיָּהוּ = 67 The Prayer Total, v. 10-20			134*	= 62	+ 72	= 67	+ 67
21	וַיֹּאמֶר יְשַׁעְיָהוּ יִשְׂאוּ דְּבֶלֶת תְּאֵנִים^		5	5	5	
	וְיִמְרְחוּ עַל־הַשְּׁחִין וְיֶחִי:		4		4	
22	וַיֹּאמֶר חִזְקִיָּהוּ מָה אוֹת^		4	4		
בֵּית יְהוָה = 34 + 26 ס	כִּי אֶעֱלֶה בֵּית יְהוָה:		4		4	
	Concluding Narrative, vs. 21-22		17	= 9	+ 8	
	Including the Framework, vs. 9-22		158	= 75	+ 83	
	Preceding narrative, vs. 1-8**		123	= 72	+ 51	
	Grand Total, vs. 1-22		281	= 147 + 134*		

$$*\ \mathbf{134} = 2 \times 67.$$

* To ascertain the numerical features of the MT text, I have left the text as it stands.

** As in the case of the parallel texts Psalm 18 and 2 Samuel 22, I regard 2 Kings 20:1-11 and Isa. 38:1-8 as two separate text traditions which should remain standing on their own. Therefore, one should not use the text of 2 Kings to 'restore' that of Isaiah.

Observations

1. In terms of its 134 words, the 6 words in v. 15a constitute the arithmetic centre of the poem (134 = 64 + 6 + 64):

<div dir="rtl" align="center">מָה־אֲדַבֵּר וְאָמַר־לִי וְהוּא עָשָׂה</div>

<div align="center">What can I say? He has spoken to me, and he is the One who has done it.</div>

His resigning to his fate, and accepting it as coming from God, is the first step for the speaker towards his confident trust that God will save him from his pitiful plight. And this may be regarded as the consciously designed meaningful centre expressing the gist of the poem.

2. As in many psalms, the author uses the switch in the direction of address as a structuring device. The first part of the poem is phrased in the 3rd person, but in the last colon of v. 12 the poet suddenly addresses God directly. This marks the interface between Strophe 1 (vs. 10-12) and Strophe 2 (vs. 13-14), which continues addressing God until the end of v. 14, except for the sudden change back to 3rd person in v. 13b for rhetorical reasons to highlight the image of the lion.

   Strophe 3, vs. 15-16, opens in v. 15 with words spoken about God (the meaningful centre), but in v. 16 the speaker addresses God again directly.

   In v. 17, however, marking the beginning of Strophe 4 (vs. 17-19), the poet once again switches back to the 3rd person form in the first colon only to return to addressing God directly throughout the Strophe 4. The coda in its turn is clearly marked by the change to the 3rd person form.

   From a logotechnical viewpoint it is interesting to note that the first and last strophes are both composed of **39** words (the 'Yahweh is One' number), and that Strophes 1-3 have **85** (5 x **17**) words, with **52** (2 x **26**) in the 3rd person sections (Column c).

   The **39** words of Strophe 4 (vs. 17-19) divide neatly into 5 words spoken about God and **34** (2 x **17**) addressed to God. And to crown it all, the **60** words of Canto II (Strophes 3-4, vs. 15-19) are divided according to the significant compositional formula **60** = **26** + **34** which reflects in reverse the numerical value of the key-words בֵּית יְהוָה, 'the house of Yahweh' in vs. 20c and 22c (2+10+22=**34** + 10+5+6+5=**26**).

3. The **134** words of the prayer, which are divided into **67** spoken about God and **67** addressed to him, represent the numerical value of לְחִזְקִיָּהוּ, 'attributed to Hezekiah' (v. 9): 12+8+7+19+10+5+6 = 67). This number reappears in the **134** words after *atnach* in the entire chapter and may have been consciously designed. If this is the case, it can be interpreted as additional evidence for the structural unity of Isaiah 38.

4. The name יהוה does not occur in the main body of the prayer. It appears only in the coda and the concluding narrative, where we find 3 occurrences (vs. 20a, 20c, 22b). In the main body of the prayer (vs. 10-19) the poet uses יָהּ (Yah) 2x (11a and 11b), and אֲדֹנָי, (Adonay) 'my Lord', also 2x (14d and 16a). This means that there are altogether **7** references to God in vs. 9-22.

   In the preceding narrative, vs. 1-8, we find **7** occurrences of the name יהוה, which bring the total number of occurrences of the name in chapter 38 up to **10**. In my opinion, this is not by chance, but deliberately designed in order to allude to the **10** steps of the dial of Ahaz (v. 7).

   Finally, the altogether **14** references to God, which correspond to the **14** verselines in the main body of the poem, may confidently be interpreted as alluding to David, since **14** represents the numerical value of his name (4 + 6 + 4 = **14**). In Isa. 9:6 and 37:35, David is specifically mentioned, and in v. 5 Yahweh significantly refers to himself as 'the God of your father David'.

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* At the time I worked on my analysis I didn't have this unquestionably important book at my disposal, but the review by C.E. Cox in *CBQ* 68/3 (2006), pp. 502-503, enabled me to register Barré's division of the text. I also learned that Barré asserts that the poem was composed independently of its context and later introduced into the narrative by the Isaian editors.

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