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Exegetical checkmate – Isaiah 4:2a: person or plant?

ABSTRACT

Traditionally interpreters have understood the phrase *hwhj j mix*, in Isaiah 4:2a as an indication of a messianic figure and translated it as “Shoot of the Lord”. To highlight this meaning the word concerned was written with a capital letter. Presently however, in stead of translating the expression with reference to a person, and particularly a messianic figure, several scholars prefer to interpret the phrase as a portrayal of luxuriant vegetation. The study reconsiders the case in terms of some aspects of inner- and inter-textual exegesis.

INTRODUCTION

Opinions hover between understanding *hwhj j mix*, as a (mere) plant and a more concrete messianic representation. One may ask whether there are any exegetical options available that would break the above-mentioned checkmate position by either reinforcing the idea that the text speaks of vegetation or identifying messianic overtures in Isaiah 4:2 and its wider context.

Baldwin (1964:93-97) indicated that Isaiah 4:2-6 serves as the conclusion of the section (2:1-4:6) which begins with the heading in chapter 2:1: “Concerning Judah and Jerusalem”. The passage deals with ideal Jerusalem in the present situation and in future, though the main theme is the contemporary situation and the threatening clouds of judgement. Throughout the passage Yahweh is depicted as King, occupying his exalted throne and displaying his glory while instructing the nations in his law. The chapter closes with scathing criticism of the extravagant life-style of women in Jerusalem, a statement which concludes our passage in 4:4.

The present discussion will be restricted to one aspect of the approaching salvation only, namely the phrase, “shoot of the Lord” (*hwhj j mix*)¹. According to some authors it is only possible to reach a positive conclusion with respect to the latter option should passages consulted yield what may be called genuine messianic prophecies, that is, if a figure is described in virtually unmistakable redemptive terms. Others include any passage which deals with new things/eschatological perspectives to be classified as messianic prophecy. As an example of the former, Isaiah 32 (cf. v1) would qualify; of the latter, chapter 35. Chapter 32 refers to a new king who is on the ascent, while chapter 35 refers to a new world only, without mentioning a royal figure or messiah (cf. Vriezen 1977:465-499).

Ancient manuscripts offer several options regarding the translation of the phrase. The Septuagint (cf. Rahlfs 1979: 571) translates *hwhj j mix* as *j pil avnyew qe* “God will shine forth”, and seems to have worked from a text which apparently used some form of *j j x*, or to have understood

1 A few examples of translations: Upper-case: Branch (AVB, NIV, NKJV); lower-case: branch (NRSV); others: radiance of the Lord (NJPS); the crops given by the Lord (NETB); apparently one translation merely refers to “the Lord” omitting any reference to “sprout/branch”: the Lord will make his land fruitful and glorious (CEV); the plant that the Lord has grown (REB); Yahweh’s seedling (NJB); the Lord will make every plant and tree (GNB); die tak van die Here (BNLV); die Spruit van die Here (ABV 1933/1954); alles wat die Here laat uitspruit (ABV 1983).

ᵚᵐᵏ, in the sense of the Aramaic ᵁᵐᵏ, meaning “brightness”. Other Greek manuscripts read ἀνατολή κυριοῦ “Lord (will be) rising”. The Vulgate has *germen Domini*, “sprout of the Lord”. The Syriac version has: *denheh dēmārjā*, “appearance or glory of the Lord” (Watts 1985:49). The Jewish Targum translated the phrase as ᵐᵏᵐᵏ ᵁᵐᵏᵐᵏ “the messiah of Yahweh /anointed of the Lord”. The Targum was probably the first document to understand Isaiah 4:2a as a reference to the messiah (Kaiser 1983:85; Wildberger 1991:165-166). According to Oswalt (1986:146) the witness of the Targum cannot be too easily gainsaid. However, generally speaking Jewish scholars (e.g. Slotki 1970:21) do not interpret the phrase as a reference to the messianic figure.

CURSORY OVERVIEW OF SOME EXEGETICAL ATTEMPTS

Broadly speaking approaches to the problem may be classified into two groups: On the one hand those who argue that the meaning of ᵚᵐᵏ (“shoot”, Isa 4:2a) should be restricted to vegetation only; on the other those who support the view that the relevant term indicates a special person with the implication that it may refer to a messianic figure. Others hover between the two options (cf. Seitz 1993:42).

ISAIAH 4:2 AND LUXURIANT VEGETATION

Gesenius-Tregelles (1950:712) understands the substantive, “shoot/branch” (Isa 4:2a) as suggestive of the produce of the land as it thrives under God’s hand. According to this view, the second part of the text (4:2b) confirms the said interpretation (cf. Gen 4:3; 13:10; Deut 1:25; 26:2, 10; 28:11-12).

Wildberger (1991:154-155) draws attention to the fact that in other related prophetic books a messianic meaning is attached to the word “shoot/branch” (ᵚᵐᵏ, Jer 23:5; 33:15; Zech 3:8; 6:12, cf. Ps 132:17). However, according to him, the same approach cannot be applied to Isaiah 4:2a. On the basis of this view, “shoot/branch” does not function as a “title” for messiah. And yet he concedes that the terms “branch” (ᵐᵏᵐᵏ) and “shoot” (ᵚᵐᵏ) which describe the person in Isaiah 11:1, do have messianic connotations. Thus a messianic meaning did make an impact on the term ᵚᵐᵏ, in 4:2a. But according to Wildberger (1991:166), this argument does not apply when interpreting the text since according to him, 4:2 is *not Isaianic* (my italics).

Following the view of Gesenius-Tregelles (1950:712), Wildberger (1991:154-155) also applies the subject referred to in the second stich of the verse, that is 4:2b, as an interpretative key of the first stich (4:2a). Thus, the *b*-part of Isaiah 4:2 impacts on the *a*-part of the text with *retrospective* effect. Consequently, the phrase “the fruit of the land” (ᵐᵏᵐᵏ ᵐᵏᵐᵏ) provides the content of meaning for 4:2a. The “branch” of 4:2a is qualified as vegetation or agricultural produce by 4:2b (Ringgren 2003:412).

Linking up with Gesenius-Tregelles and Wildberger, Kaiser (1983:85-86) pointed out that the phrase, “shoot of Yahweh” should not be understood in this text (4:2) as it appears in Jeremiah 23:5; 33:15 and Zechariah 3:8; 6:12, namely as the king of the time of salvation from the house of David, but in accordance with the parallel position of the fruit of the land as quite simply whatever Yahweh makes to grow in the land (cf. Snijders 1979:68).

According to Widyapranawa (1990:19) the substantive concerned refers to the remnant of Israel, now redeemed and purified. It is described as a branch sprouting forth from the stump of a tree that has been cut down. This sapling or branch now grows beautifully and gloriously, showing that it is rooted in the grace of the Lord. However, others reject this possibility (cf. Kaiser 1983:85).

Some of those who support the vegetation-related view trace its meaning elsewhere in the

Old Testament (cf. i.a. Gen 2:9), thus excluding Isaiah. In this way the study of indicators related to the word in question in other parts of Isaiah is circumvented or neglected. When this word is studied in Isaiah in isolation from its synonyms, champions of the view find no indication of any messianic connotation linked to it or applied as such.

EVALUATION

Several researchers are convinced that the phrase, *hwhy j msk*, does not represent an authentic reference to a messianic figure in Isaiah 4:2a. It may be argued that the Old Testament probably nowhere provides a comprehensive/ stereotyped expression or “title” for the messiah. And even if it were possible to identify such a term, it is a moot question whether it will be possible to show that all references to a messiah will comply with this imagined title in a way consistent with the said paradigm. It may thus be taken as exegetical presumption when authors decide that it is compulsory to identify an alleged stereotyped term in every passage or text before any of these would qualify as references to genuine messianic material.

Secondly, it is not clear why a single idea, comprising a vegetation-related meaning only, should be given pride of place to prove that the expression in Isaiah 4:2a does *not* refer to the messiah. It would seem that it is precisely this reading of the text which undermines the approach of the views under discussion. This means that the same factor which functions as ground for proof actually undermines the viewpoint. This reading of the text is hampered by its engaging only Isaiah 4:2b when dealing with the exegetical crux of 4:2a. Further, defining the meaning of the relevant substantive (“shoot”) in terms of what is considered as the only possible meaning, namely something related to vegetation, places a limitation on the exegetical horizon and thus the meaning of the passage.

ISAIAH 4:2 AND MESSIANIC OVERTURES: FEATURES, FIGURES AND MODELS

In his vision Isaiah saw Yahweh seated on his throne (Isa 6:1). The prophet realised that the Lord, the universal Ruler, revealed himself as the great King (6:5d). In addition to this presentation of God as King, the book refers to a group comprising several historical kings, namely Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah (1:1; 7:1; 36:1); Rezin of Syria and Pekah of Israel (7:1); Sennacherib of Assyria (36:1) and Merodach-Baladan of Babylonia (39:1). A third category includes figures in possession of royal features, but who are mostly anonymous. Only their qualities, capabilities or destinations are mentioned (4:2; 7:14; 8:23-9:6; 11:1-16; [16:4-5]; 32:1-8; 33: 17, 22; 35:1-10). These passages describe anonymous personalities who in some cases are linked to the name and throne of king David (9:6), or his father Jesse (11:1). These individuals are generally considered as messianic figures, while those of the second group may perhaps be considered as having less prominent messianic characteristics.

Others are of the opinion that texts which allegedly refer to a messianic figure only provide models of a way of life and conduct for contenders of the throne. The latter are encouraged to follow these models in order to be able to rule as king in an acceptable manner. The relevant passages thus represent a blueprint for an ideal king. It does not necessarily deal with prophecies regarding a messianic king. According to this view, the kingship of men or messianic figures play a subservient role in the relevant passages in the Old Testament and especially with a view to the present discussion, in the book of Isaiah. Material related to these ideas has been discussed in depth (cf. e.g. Vriezen 1977:465-500).

Passages which may be interpreted in terms of a messianic figure reveal more than models for future kings. These references go beyond a mere human being. The figures concerned display

features which remind of the divine (9:5-6, 11:1-9, cf. below). The relevant figures possess characteristics which might constitute a messianic personality.

Perhaps one could expect support for a messianic perspective from inter alia the term “messiah” itself. With the exception of one reference, namely 45:1, the Hebrew substantive, *ḥiṣyān* “anointed” or “messiah” (verb: *ḥiṣm*: “anoint”) does not appear in connection with a messianic figure from Israel (Seybold 1998:43-54; cf. Dan 9:25-26). In Isaiah this word is applied, perhaps ironically, to a non-Israelite, namely Cyrus the Persian king (44:28; 45:1). He was responsible for the liberation of many nations including Israel from the yoke of the Babylonian hegemony in the sixth century B.C. (ca. 539 B.C., cf. II Chron 36:22-23; Ezra 1:1-4). Be that as it may, the word carries the meaning of being anointed for a task pertaining to the salvation of God’s people. This idea is reflected in passages where such figures appear (e.g. 9:5-6; 11:1-9; 16:5; 32:1, 15-16).

At the time when the Old Testament was translated into the Greek language (the Septuagint/LXX ca. 200 B.C.), expectations among the Jewish people about the coming of the messiah ran high. It is not surprising then that the translators of the Septuagint made provision for this perspective in their rendering of the Old Testament. For example, in the LXX version of Isaiah 11:1 the Hebrew *ṣfj* (“branch”) is replaced by the Greek *ῥάβδος* (“royal scepter”). However, the Jews began using the term “messiah” for the promised redeemer only during the inter-testamental period (cf. Russell 1963:119-142). This information does not support the portrayal of a messianic figure in Isaiah 4:2.

ISAIAH 4:2A DEPICTS THE MESSIAH

Looking beyond the immediate context, it is important to note that according to Young (1972:173-181), Isaiah 4:2*a* links up with II Samuel 23:5 where the same root of the word appears. The author uses the idea for his own purpose, namely to designate the messiah. He states that the sprout is that shoot which comes from the tree of David which has been cut down, and which springs to life from its fallen trunk and brings the tree to more glorious and wondrous heights than before. He notes Isaiah 28:5, which sustains the same relation to 28:1 as the present passage does to the preceding (4:1). In 28:5 that is attributed to the Lord himself which in the verse concerned is spoken of as the “sprout”. Young avers that the parallel position of the idea seems to exclude an interpretation limiting the reference to vegetation alone. He points out that predicates which are used in Isaiah 4:2 to describe the sprout are those which in other parts of Isaiah are applied to the Lord himself (cf. 28:1-4 with 2:5-4:1; 60:19; cf. Zech 2:5).

He also considers two possibilities of translating the phrase. Some would opt for “that which the Lord causes to sprout”; others “he who is sprouted forth from the Lord”. The sprout of the Lord, on this interpretation, is the sprout which the Lord gives.

Since the genitive indicates source or origin, Young concludes that this branch is of the Lord, it is his, and comes from him. It is not clear whether this means that he is a branch which the Lord causes to grow up unto David or whether he is simply a branch which the Lord gives. He inclines toward the first possibility citing some passages to support this position (II Sam 23:5; Ps 132:17, also Jer 23:5; 33:15; Zech 3:8). It would seem then that the phrase “sprout of the Lord” signifies “that which the Lord causes to sprout”. In either case, however, it is clear that in identifying the sprout as of the Lord Isaiah is excluding a reference to the mere produce of the land. The reference then is to the divine origin of the one whom the Lord causes to sprout forth. Following this way of thinking, he also understands 4:2*b* (the fruit of the land) as related to the messianic figure mentioned in 4:2*a*. In this respect he turns the argument of Wildberger and others around by applying his exposition of the *a*-part of 4:2 to the *b*-part.

Perhaps the Dead Sea Scrolls can be of some assistance in this regard. The first copy of the book of Isaiah found in cave 1 (1QIsa^a) contains the words “and Judah” after Israel in 4:2a (see Flint 2002:249). According to Wildberger (1991:162) this is unnecessary, since Judah is naturally included when Israel is mentioned. On the contrary, according to Watts (1985:47-48), the surrounding chapters have carefully separated Israel’s fate from that of Judah and Jerusalem. If it were unnecessary, as understood by Wildberger, it would be because the substantive *j mīx*, (“branch”) carries messianic-royal significance and thus includes Judah. However, in spite of his statement that the branch is used for the king to come, Watts (1985:49-50) follows Wildberger and others who find the meaning of v4a in v4b, excluding other exegetical possibilities.

Some are desperate to find a hidden messianic signal in texts in order to prove their views. Thus some authors interpret the “branch” in allegorical terms. Young (1972:177) argues that “sprout” (4:2a) refers to the divine nature of the messiah, while the “fruit of the land” (4:2b) points to his humanity. The same approach is also applied to the New Testament, where according to some the branch would reflect Christ’s divine nature, while the fruit of the land would reflect his human nature (cf. Oswald 1986:146). This approach leaves much to be desired.

EVALUATION

Exegetical practice allows for a technique whereby one part of a text may be considered as an interpretive key to explain another part of the same text (inner-textual). As stated above, the first group applies this to Isaiah 4:2 where the second of the two back-to-back stichs (4:2b) is used to explain the first (4:2a). This interpretation is acceptable as applied by Wildberger (1991:154-155). However, this approach tends to isolate the text from surrounding material while restricting its meaning in an atomistic way. An inter-textual approach (to read a word or text/passage in its context) should therefore be engaged as well (cf. e.g. Williamson 2009:1-244).

MESSIAH AND CHILD FIGURES, YOUNG ANIMALS, PLANT IMAGERY, AND KINGSHIP

It may be helpful to enquire if and how an approach of engaging not only the immediate (inner-textual), but also and especially the wider context (inter-textual) will impact on the way a messianic figure is possibly depicted in Isaiah in general and specifically in Isaiah 4:2.

It must be reiterated that certain passages in Isaiah contain some what would seem straightforward references to (a) messianic figure(s). Most of these passages appear in chapters dealing with the history of king Ahaz (7:1-16; 9:5-6; 11:1-5, 10, cf. 4:2).

These passages are dominated by references to child figures, young animals and new plants sprouting forth. Regarding the first category, the following are relevant to the discussion. Note the references to young children: “son” (*ʿBā*): 7:1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 9, 14; 8:2, 3, 6; 9:5; 11:14; “child(ren)”/“son” (*ʿBā/dl*): 8:18; 9:5; 11:7; “boy” (*ʿr*): 7:16; 8:4; 10:19; 11:6; “little child” (*ʿr*): 11:6; “shoot and branch”: both in 11:1; “the nursing child” (*qny*): 11:8; “the weaned child” (*l m*): 11:8. Other references to young people in Isaiah include: daughters (22:4; 32:9-11; 43:6; 49:22; 23:4) and sons (19:11; 43:6; 49:15, 17; 60:4). Numerous references to children as a designation for Israel may be found in the book (Trommius, no date: 377-378). The prophet highlights the general social condition in Israel by means of a comparative style which focuses on the adolescent behaviour of young people and their demise (20:4; 40:30; 3:4, 5; 9:16; 13:18; 23:4; 31:8; 40:30). However, in some cases the references are positive (54:4; 62:5; 65:20).

The second category deals with young animals. In the description of the new paradise Isaiah 11:6 refers to a lamb (*cbk*), a young goat (*ydb*), a calf (*lg*, cf. 27:10) and a young lion (*nypk*); v7

adds the young of the cow and the bear (חַיִּי וְחַיִּיָּהּ). Note how the references to little children and young animals appear intertwined (11:6, cf. 8; 41:14).

The third category deals with plants. Van Wieringen (1989:203-207) pointed out that Isaiah 6-12 refers to trees and shrubs. These references are arranged according to a literary pattern. Miscall (1993:28-30) indicated that plant imagery pervades Isaiah and is a facet of his thorough development of images and metaphors. The prophet uses approximately ninety different terms for trees, grass, planting, gardens, etc. He covers the entire life cycle of a plant from planting (5:2; 28:24; 30:23), to growing and flourishing (37:30-32, 41:17-20), to withering and dying (1:30; 34:4; 40:6-8), and to being cut down and used for a fire or for an idol (44:9-20). Dry and rotten wood or plants are burned (1:31; 5:24; 10:16-19) or blown away (41:14-16). Plant imagery is used in contexts of judgement and destruction, of salvation and restoration and of the lonely remnant (1:8; 6:11-13; 10:19).

Porter (2003:1-97) studied the relationship between high-ranking officials (kings) and vegetation as depicted in Assyrian iconography. Against this background, it is not unusual to find high-ranking officials portrayed in terms of vegetation in ancient Near Eastern literature in general and in Isaiah in particular (Watts 1985:171).

Mazor (2004:73-90) investigated different solutions which link prophecy and the “branch/shoot” and tree motifs in Isaiah 10:33-11:9. The allegorical solution interprets the carnivorous animals as a symbol of either the evil in society (the social aspect), or the nations who perturb Israel (the nationalistic aspect). The advantage solution does not deal with animals as such, but the advantage for humans of the animals’ change in nature. Mazor opts for the mythological solution and on this basis indicates that both the shoot/branch and the tree represent royal figures in Isaiah. Other prophets also portray kings as trees (Ezek 17, 31; Dan 4).

This confronts the reader ineluctably with the phenomenon that in the Old Testament royal figures (both God’s chosen and his enemies) are pictured with the aid of objects of vegetation. Thus, in these terms the sprout of the Lord referred to in Isaiah 4:2a may be understood not merely as a plant, but as a person (a human) and even a person of royal status. This is underscored by other passages in Isaiah which makes it clear that figures of salvation (read *messianic* personalities) are constantly depicted in terms of plant imagery.

Thus the intertwining of references to children, young animals and shoots makes it almost impossible to ignore the impact of this observation on Isaiah 4:2. This means that the text may at least have initiated the idea of a young messiah depicted as a shoot (cf. 11:1). In addition, Isaiah 4:5-6 speaks of the provision to protect God’s people against weather conditions. According to Isaiah 32:1-2, this protection will be undertaken by a human being.

Another relevant argument deals with the problem of consistency versus inconsistency in connection with arguments brought forward to deny any messianic perspective in Isaiah 4:2. It is not clear why some interpreters are comfortable with the text of Isaiah which uses two different substantives, namely צֶמַח וְיִשְׁעֵי צֶמַח to indicate one and the same messianic figure (11:1), but rejects the possibility that the same figure may be identified by a third noun, namely יְהוָה (4:2). Even the pseudo-messianic king of Babylon is depicted as a plant (14:19, צֶמַח).² All these terms are taken from the plant world. The reader will hopefully realise that Isaiah applies these terms to a single messianic figure (11:1; 4:2a).

The depiction of the messiah in terms of plant imagery is further reinforced by the application of two notions which introduce another figure of salvation, namely the Servant of the Lord (53:2). This figure is related to the messiah who appears in the earlier parts of the book (cf.

2 Ps 92:8, 13-16 compare the goddess with the growth of plants. Likewise the faithful in their steadfastness are compared to the thriving of the palm and cedar.

e.g. Ringgren 1961:65-67; Williamson 1998:30-166; Firth and Williamson 2009:25).³ Describing the ascent of this figure, the author engages two objects from the world of plants. The Servant is depicted as a *qin w* (meaning: “young plant”, “sapling”, “sucker”, or “nursing child”, cf. 11:8) and a *wvwd* (“root”, cf. 5:24; 11:1,10; 14:30; 37:31; 53:2, cf. also the *po’el* pf.: “take root” 40:24). It is remarkable that so many objects related to vegetation are used in connection with the representation of a messianic figure/servant. Why should *j mk*: (4:2) be excluded from this group?

These arguments are also supported by the prophet’s intention of creating an association between Yahweh and the world of plants in more than one way. This observation leads to the following. First, the people of God are presented as sprouting like a plant (27:6). Israel will sprout like a plant bearing fruit (cf. Mic 5:1-14). Israel is also presented as a vineyard in the description of the relationship between the Lord and his people in Isaiah 5:1-7. This passage follows directly on our chapter 4 adding to the literary phenomenon of describing people in terms of vegetation.

Closely related to the latter idea is the depiction of the Lord as the great Gardener (Isa 5, cf. 17:5-6; Miscall 1993:29). Note again that chapter 5 follows the passage which includes 4:2. Apart from the latter, the Lord is presented as the great Forester (35, 40-62; Miscall 1993:29). Hinting at this idea in Isaiah 7:18-25, the motif is given a dominant position in the middle of section 9:8-11:16. God’s decision to destroy Israel is pictured as felling trees (9:9b[10b]), as hewing off palm branch and reed (9:13[14]), and burning of underbrush (9:17-18[18-19]). The figures of the axe and the woodman (2:12-18; 10:15-19; 10:33-34) are most appropriate in this motif. The burn-off of underbrush is repeated in 10:17-19. Taken together it all fits the depiction of the decreed destruction of the whole land (10:23). However, the motif reaches its peak in 10:32-11:1. The Lord marches through Israel and arrives at Nob. The unwavering hand signal of 9:16,17; 9:20,21 and 10:4 changes. God now waves his hand towards Zion (10:32). His signal before Zion is for her to grow and expand (10:32). Thus a shoot can now spring up from the stump of Jesse and a branch will bear fruit (11:1). The Forester’s management will bring peace and prosperity to the primeval forest (11:6-8). The Root of Jesse becomes God’s signal to the nations (Miscall 1993:29). The depiction of both the Gardener and the Forester determines the meaning of the branch/fruit in Isaiah 4:2a.

Lexicons indicate that the verb (“sprout”), which is related to the substantive (“shoot”), is used in connection with the idea of sprouting plants in a literal mode (e.g. Gen 2:9). However, the verb can also be used to introduce the sprouting/origin of immaterial, new things (Isa 42:9; 43:19; 44:4; 58:8). In the causative form *hiph’il* the word also appears in a metaphorical sense in texts where it is stated that God will allow non-material things, like righteousness (thus not only plants), to bud (45:8), as well as praise (61:11, cf. Song of Songs 4:12-14; Ps 85:12; 89:3-7; also Hosea 8:7; Zech 3:8; Jer 23:5; 33:15; Ps 132:17).

In support of this perspective it may be argued that the expression, “in that day”, is constantly connected to the idea of the establishment of new things and includes much more than rich vegetation or produce. It indicates the repetition of events from the past which will be applicable in the present and future (e.g. the Exodus/Sinai events, Isa 4:5).

It is striking that references to the involvement of the Spirit of God occur both in the passage under discussion (Isa 4:2, cf. v4) and in one which is usually taken as a reference to the messiah (11:1, 2). Isaiah 32:15-16 announces the outpouring of God’s Spirit from on high. This is immediately followed by a change in nature. Although Wildberger (2002:260) denies a relationship between a messianic figure and nature in 4:2a and b, he does acknowledge that 32:15 refers to God’s Spirit. However, he fails to note the relationship created between the Spirit and nature in verse 15b-16. The striking point is that this connection appears in the same

3 In Zech 6:12 it is stated that the shoot will sprout and in 3:8 the word “sprout” appears in connection with the Servant of the Lord, a figure in possession of different traits but related to the messianic figure.

chapter which mentions the arrival of a messianic king (32:1).

The prophet announces that before the blessing of “that day” will arrive (4:2ff.), Yahweh has to wash away the filth and purge the blood of Jerusalem (4:4). Elsewhere the word *j jcdj*, used here indicates priestly washing (II Chron 4:6; Ezek 40:38). Even *j jr* which has a more general meaning is sometimes used for priestly washing (e.g. Ex 40:12). The author thus had in mind sacrificial washing, thus enabling the remnant to be called holy (4:3). The figure referred to in 4:2 carries a message concerning the priestly washing away of sin. When that condition is fulfilled, the shoot of Yahweh shall be beautiful and glorious. The closing words assert that the Exodus symbols of Yahweh’s presence will cover/protect the city, a promise which is developed in chapter 32. There a human (32:2) will provide the promised shelter from heat and the tempest.

Again, as indicated above, in prophetic literature the word “branch/shoot” (of the Lord) serves *inter alia* as indication of a messianic figure. In this mode the prophets probably added the word to their vocabulary at the time of Israel’s exile and the early Persian period. In its earlier form it may have served as an indication of a royal figure (cf. Jer 23:3-5; 33:14-26). However, apparently the word also contracted priestly characteristics/traits (Zech 3:8; 6:9-15). If 4:2 is considered in the context of verses 3-6, it is possible that the word concerned described a priestly figure. Verse 3 mentions the priestly requirement to be holy, verse 4 refers to purifying and reference is made to the temple mount. Thus, on occasion the figure concerned would be presented as a king, at other times as a priest. However, the emphasis on the royal aspect seems to have been maintained. Perhaps verses 3-6 were recorded to discourage a potential royal understanding of the word in the light of Zerubbabel’s loss of status and the fact that the priesthood was on the ascent (cf. Hag 2:20-23; Zech 6:9-15; Baldwin 1964:93-97).

Further, the fact of the shoot being linked to “the day of the Lord” enhances the shoot to a position which rises above the idea of a good crop, namely the sphere of human beings. This is highlighted by the fact that the figure concerned has at his disposal the offices of king and priest in that he will be washing away the sins of God’s people. In the passages discussed, the shoot is associated with a human figure endowed with the powers of king and priest. As king he rules over his people, as priest he cleanses them of sin (Baldwin 1964:93-94, 97).

It is noteworthy that the two relevant references in 11:1, both of which belong to the world of plants, are followed by a reference to the verb describing plants bearing fruit (*hrpjl*). A similar combination comprising plant-related terms, namely “shoot” and “fruit” appears in 4:2 (*yrpjl*). In the former case (11:1) the combination is generally accepted as a definitive indication of the messianic figure. In the latter (4:2), according to some the parallel position of substantives (as in 11:1) is not accepted as an indication of a messianic figure. It is difficult to understand why one text (Isa 4:2), so obviously part of the rest expressing the same idea and the same plant motif, should be disqualified as a reference to a/the messiah. Biblical authors did not restrict themselves to the usage of a single vegetation-related term in order to identify the messianic personality.

In any case, it may be accepted that the *b*-part of the text under discussion (4:2), complements the *a*-part in the sense that the successful reign of a messiah (4:2*a*) will bring in its train abundance of natural/agricultural produce to the benefit of Israel (4:2*b*). The same structure appears in 11:1. There it is indicated that a branch/shoot will sprout, combined with a reference to produce of vegetation benefitting the people of Israel (*hr pjl*). This sentence structure where the second stich (11:1*b*) refers to vegetation issuing from the branch, comes close to that of 4:2 where the *b*-part also deals with rich vegetation produce resulting from the appearance of messiah.

CONCLUSION

The presentation of a messianic figure in different parts of the book is set forth mainly in terms of vegetation. This observation places Isaiah 4:2a in the same category as 11:1. It seems inconsistent to accept some cases speaking in terms of plant imagery and a messianic person (11:1), while rejecting others (4:2). The present emphasis on the literary unity of Isaiah allows for investigations into the book by considering trajectories of key words or themes which run through the document. This leaves space for key words to be interpreted in relation to one another.⁴ On the basis of all the arguments presented it would seem that the phrase *hwby j mx* in Isaiah 4:2 depicts the Messiah.

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4 If no pages are mentioned, the whole book applies. Gileadi 1994:1-43; Sweeney 1996; 1988; Sweeney & Ben Zvi 2003; Melugin & Sweeney 1996; Williamson 1998; 1999:174-195; 2009; Firth & Williamson 2009.

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