

Numerical Features of the Book of Isaiah

A New Approach to its Compositional Structure

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The Structural Design of the Book of Isaiah

Many generations of critical scholars have grown accustomed to distinguishing three major literary works in the book of Isaiah: First Isaiah (1-39), Second Isaiah (40-55), and Third Isaiah (56-66), or Prophecies (1-35), Narratives (36-39), and Prophecies (40-66) as an alternative. However, since the final text has been designed as a coherent literary entity with a structure of its own, we must reassess these tripartite structures, because they do not do justice to the overall architecture of the book.

In the final form of the book the traditional division into three distinct *literary works* is only relevant for the *historical setting* of 1-39 in *Judah* in the reign of Hezekiah before the exile, the *setting* of 40-55 in *Babylonia* during the exile, and the *setting* of 56-66 in *Palestine* in postexilic times. As I shall show below, there is strong numerical evidence for assuming a different tripartite structure: 1-27, 28-35, and 36-66, which can be interpreted as representing three stages in the process of the coming into existence of the book, in much the same way as in the coming into being of the Enneateuch: 1. Genesis-Numbers, 2. Deuteronomy, and 3. Joshua-Kings, as I have argued [elsewhere](#), and in the coming into existence of the book of [Jeremiah](#).

The following main divisions are to be found in introductions and commentaries, showing that there is some consensus only concerning certain sections:

1-12; 13-23; 24-27; 28-33; 34-35; 36-39; 40-55; 56-66 (*eight* main parts: C.R. North).¹

1-12; 13-23; 24-27; 28-35; 36-39; 40-55; 56-66 (*seven* main parts: e.g., B.S. Childs).²

1-12; 13-27; 28-35; 36-39; 40-48; 49-54; 55-66 (*seven* main parts: D.A. Dorsey).³

1,1-2,5; 2,6-22; 3,1-4,1; 4,2-12,6; 13,1-39,8; 40,1-54,17; 55,1-66,24 (*seven* main parts: R.H. O'Connell).⁴

1-12; 13-27; 28-35; 36-39; 40-55; 56-66 (*six* main parts: U.F. Berges).⁵

1-12; 13-27; 28-39; 40-55; 56-66 (*five* main parts: W.A.M. Beuken).⁶

1-12; 13-35; 36-39; 40-55; 56-66 (*five* main parts: A.J. Everson).⁷

1-6; 7-14; 15-22; 23-27; 28-33; 34-39; 40,1-43,23; 44,24-48,22; 49,1-52,12; 52,13-57,21; 58-61; 62-66 (*twelve*).⁸

In terms of the subject matter and numerical considerations I divide the book (with e.g., B.S. Childs) into *seven* Segments: Isaiah 1-12 **P**; 13-23 **P**; 24-27 **[]**; 28-35 **P**; 36-39 **P**; 40-55 **S**; 56-66 **Colophon**.

This is in line with books such as Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus and Deuteronomy, all of which exhibit the popular *sevenfold* structure. In MT (Codex Leningrad and BHS) these segments are demarcated by the Masoretic layout markers **P** and **S**, except Segment III (24-27) marked **[]**. Interestingly, the Aleppo Codex as well as 1QIsa have a clear open space after 27,13, which supports the delimitation of Segment III.⁹

The following outline shows that three of the seven segments are made up of a number of words which are a multiple of the divine name numbers **17** and **26**: Segments **I**, **V**, and **VI**. As I have demonstrated in the quantitative structural analysis of a great number of texts, this should be interpreted as due to a widely used compositional technique to finalize and seal a given literary entity.

The fact that the boundaries of three segments can be established with certainty has important consequences for one of the boundaries of Segments **II**, **IV**, and **VII**: that is to say for Segment **II** between 12,6 and 13,1, for **IV** between 35,10 and 36,1, and for **VII** between 55,13 and 56,1.

¹ C.R. North, *Isaiah* in: The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible, 1962. See also A. Schoors, *Jesaja* (BOT, 1972).

² B.S. Childs, *Isaiah: A Commentary*, The Old Testament Library, 2001.

³ *The Literary Structure of the Old Testament: A Commentary on Genesis-Malachi*, Grand Rapids, 1999, 217-235.

⁴ *Concentricity and Continuity: The Literary Structure of Isaiah* (JSOTSup 188), Sheffield, 1994.

⁵ Ulrich F. Berges, *The Book of Isaiah: Its Composition and Final Form* (Hebrew Bible Monographs, 46), Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2012. See also J. Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 1-39*, The Anchor Bible, 19, 2000.

⁶ W.A.M. Beuken, *Jesaja 1-12*, *Jesaja 13-27*, *Jesaja 28-39*, HTKAT, 2003, 2007, 2010, and *Jesaja*, POT II-III, 1979-89.

⁷ A.J. Everson, *Isaiah* in: Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible, 2000.

⁸ J.D.W. Watts, *Isaiah 1-33* and *Isaiah 34-66*, Word Biblical Commentary, 24, 1985 and 25, 1987.

⁹ The reader can consult the Aleppo Codex for free, published online by the Ben-Svi Institute, Jerusalem©2007: <http://www.aleppocodex.org/newsite/index.html>.

Segment I: Isa 1-12	Prophecies mainly concerning Judah and Jerusalem: P	252 vs; 3120 (120x26) words.
Segment II: Isa 13-23	Prophecies concerning foreign nations and Israel: P	189 vs; 2399 words.
Segment III: Isa 24-27	YHWH's judgement on the world and his glorious reign: []	69 vs; 824 words.
Segment IV: Isa 28-35	Prophecies about YHWH's transformation of the world: P	166 vs; 2178 words.
Segment V: Isa 36-39	A prophetic evaluation of the Assyrian onslaught of Judah: P	90 vs; 1378 (53x26) words.
Segment VI: Isa 40-55	Prophecies about the disillusioned people in Babylonia: S	333 vs; 4335 (255x17) words.
Segment VII: Isa 56-66	Prophecies about the restoration in postexilic Palestine: Colophon	192 vs; 2697 words.

For the sake of convenience, the results of the quantitative structural analysis of the seven segments, their inner structure and their numerical features, will be presented in separate files. Needless to say, in order to determine their compositional structure, the Masoretic layout markers will be consistently taken seriously. Special attention will be paid to the passages highlighted by the divine name numbers, the divine speeches (DSS, indicated and numbered in Column 3 in the table) as well as the occurrences of the name **YHWH**.

Finally, in order not to burden the reader with too much information, I shall limit myself regarding the number of *letters*, mentioning only the significant cases, e.g., Chapter 1, which has **1456 (56x26)**, Chapter 2, which has **1037 (61x17)**, and Chapters 11-12, which has **1139 (67x17)**. We have to give the Masoretes their due, for haven't they diligently counted even the letters?

The book of Isaiah is in its entirety a numerical composition exhibiting the same numerical features we found in the historical books, Genesis-Kings, and in the book of Psalms. It is from beginning to end governed by the two divine name numbers **17** and **26** which are utilized to finalize, seal, and highlight certain larger and smaller literary units and to imbue them with symbolic significance: the presence of YHWH through the numerical values of his name.

A computer assisted statistical inquiry has brought to light the following percentages of verses and words highlighted by **17** and **26** in the *seven* Segments:

Segment I (1-12):	148 of the 252 verses (59%) and 100% of the 3120 (120x26) words.
Segment II (13-23):	143 of the 189 verses (76%) and 1611 of the 2399 words (67%).
Segment III (24-27):	32 of the 69 verses (46%) and 361 of the 824 words (44%).
Segment IV (28-35):	80 of the 166 verses (48%) and 1078 of the 2178 words (49%)
Segment V (36-39):	55 of the 90 verses (61%) and 100% of the 1378 (53x26) words.
Segment VI (40-55):	192 of the 333 verses (58%) and 100% of the 4335 (255[=15x17]x17) words.
Segment VII (56-66):	135 of the 192 verses (70%) and 1744 of the 2697 words (65%).
Segments I-VII (1-66):	785 of the 1291 verses (61%) and 13627 of the 16931 words (80%).

Most significantly, the number of words in the divine utterances corroborate the *sevenfold* structure of the book in a spectacular way. At the same time, it demonstrates the meticulous care with which the utterances/speeches/messages ascribed to God (DSS) were composed as multiples of the divine name numbers **17** and **26**. The symbolic significance is to express YHWH's presence through his name.

Segment I: Isaiah 1-12	23 DSS with altogether	663 (39x17) words.	} 1989 (117x17)
Segment II: Isaiah 13-23	23 DSS with altogether	520 (20x26) words.	
Segment III: Isaiah 24-27	2 DSS with altogether	52 (2x26) words.	
Segment IV: Isaiah 28-35	16 DSS with altogether	468 (18x26) words.	
Segment V: Isaiah 36-39	9 DSS with altogether	286 (11x26) words.	
Segment VI: Isaiah 40-55	68 DSS with altogether	2652 (102[6x17]x26) words.	
Segment VII: Isaiah 56-66	29 DSS with altogether	1482 (57x26) words.	

This means that the evidence for a *sevenfold* structure is overwhelming and, in my view, conclusive.

The state of the book in its final form

The numerical evidence gleaned from the quantitative structural analysis can shed new light on the *final stage* of the compositional process of the book which occurred in *seven* successive stages. Therefore, what is presented here is not a description of the historical process of the coming into existence of the book, but the coming into being of its final form.

The first stage was the editing and finalizing of Segment I (1-12), containing important biographical material about the prophet Isaiah as well as his prophecies concerning *Judah and Jerusalem*. It was rounded off and sealed as a distinct literary entity by its **3120** (120x26) words. The first segment of the book ends with YHWH's *judgement on Israel's enemies and its future hope*, which sets the tone, as we shall see, for the conclusions of Segments III (24-27), IV (28-35), and VII (56-66).

The second stage was the editing and finalizing of Segment II (13-23) on the basis of a collection of oracles concerning *the foreign nations and Israel*.

This was closely followed by *the third stage*, the editing and finalizing of Segment III (24-27) dealing with YHWH's *judgement on the world* and his glorious reign. At this point in the compositional process Segments I-III, Isaiah 1-27 were rounded off and sealed by **510** (30x17) verses.

The fourth stage covered a broader scope, Isaiah's prophecies about God's *transformation of the world*, Segment IV (28-35), which was rounded off and finalized in the same way as Segment III, that is to say, by means of the significant number of verses of the book until this point: **676**, which is a multiple of **26** (26x26). At this stage, the book ends with YHWH's *final judgement of the hostile nations* and the bright perspective of *Zion's happy future* expressed so eloquently in chapters 34 and 35.

The fifth stage was the editing and finalizing of Segment V (36-39), which is a prophetic evaluation of the Assyrian onslaught of Judah during the reign of King Zedekiah. It was rounded off and sealed as a distinct literary entity by its **1378** words, which is a multiple of **26** (53x26).

As I have argued elsewhere, chapters 36-39 were intentionally written, on the one hand, to conclude the book of (Proto) Isaiah, and on the other hand, to bridge the gap between pre-exilic times and the Babylonian Exile – note the subtle way in which the Babylonians are brought into the picture in chapter 39! Segment V paves the way for the prophecies of Deutero-Isaiah by prelude on his characteristic theological themes. Therefore, it functions in a decided way as the theological preamble to Deutero-Isaiah and may in all probability stem from the hand of Deutero-Isaiah himself during the Babylonian exile. That is why his prophecies can start in chapter 40 *medias in res* without any introduction regarding their setting. Being the prelude to Deutero-Isaiah, it is an indispensable element in the book of Isaiah as a whole and is certainly much more than simply a 'historical appendix'. See pages 1-2 in my analysis of [Isaiah 36-39](#).

The sixth stage was the editing and finalizing of Segment VI (40-55), Deutero-Isaiah's prophecies dealing with the problems of the disillusioned exiles in Babylonia. In much the same way as Segment V (36-39), it was rounded off as a distinct literary entity and sealed by its **4335** words, which is a multiple of the other divine name number, **17** (255[=15x17]x17).

The final stage was the editing and finalizing of Segment VII (56-66), which is an elaboration (*Fortschreibung*) of Deutero-Isaiah, containing prophecies dealing with the restoration of the people of Israel in postexilic Judah. Most significantly, it ends in exactly the same way as Segments I (1-12), III (24-27), and IV (28-35) with YHWH's *final judgement of the hostile nations* and the bright perspective of *Zion's happy future*, which is in this case expressed so eloquently in chapters 65 and 66.

Continue to [Isaiah 1-12](#)