

ISAIAH 24: A CASE OF FORM OVER CONTENT?

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Isaiah's so-called "Little Apocalypse" in chs. 24-27 raises a fascinating question for Bible translators. Given that these chapters exhibit such a concentration of an array of Hebrew rhetorical elements, they raise the question of the priority of *form* over *content*. What is indisputable about this portion of the book is that form plays a vital role in the presentation. Here the author(s) or editors have brought together in an elegant way structures and wordplays that are far more than mere supports for their content; they are in fact deliberate attempts to demonstrate that content plays a secondary role to that of form.

Isaiah 24 will illustrate the issue and provide a daunting challenge for all translators who are concerned to draw out the full impact of creative Hebrew writing.

Isaiah 24

Briefly stated, the chapter falls into three sections—vv. 1-3, 4-13, and 14-23—that together carry a clear message of destruction and social upheaval (vv. 1-3, 4-13), followed by praise for God's majesty and power in vv. 14-23. The overall tone has echoes of apocalyptic imagery and language.

In order to convey these messages, the author/editor of Isaiah 24 has chosen a series of rhetorical devices to highlight them.¹ The principal devices used are: repetition, assonance, alliteration, keywords, parallelism, plays on words, together with a typical piling up of synonymous or near-synonymous phrases. There is also a heavy concentration of unusual terms and phrases along with intertextual links to other OT traditions.

Repetition

There are three kinds of repetition found in this chapter. They are the repetition of (1) forms, (2) terms, and (3) phrases.

1. Repeated forms

Verse 2 – There are six pairs of phrases in which each phrase is constructed in a similar manner, namely with the preposition *kē* "as/like" prefixed to a noun or participle describing a member of the community. The structure lists a range of community members, binding them together despite their contrasting functions or

¹ See also H. G. M. Williamson, "Sound, Sense and Language in Isaiah 24-27," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 46 (1995): 1-9.

status, in a similar fate. NRSV continues the tradition of trying to retain something of the Hebrew form of this verse but in the process hides the fact that the Hebrew preposition *kē* serves as the principle binding agent, by rendering *kē* in pairs of “as . . . so . . .” in order to make for better flow in English.

As with the people, *so* with the priest;
 As with the slave, *so* with his master;
 As with the maid, *so* with her mistress;
 As with the buyer, *so* with the seller;
 As with the lender, *so* with the borrower;
 As with the creditor, *so* with the debtor;

Other modern versions, such as NJPS and GNB, highlight the fact that the basic message of the form is that all in the community are facing a shared fate, then simply set out the pairs in what has to be a rather bland listing. In these cases, priority has clearly been given to the content over the form. The problem is that something vitally important has been lost in the process, namely, a most creative speech pattern that not only provides emphasis but elegantly incorporates a wide range of persons to represent the entire community.

Verse 3 – Here two Hebrew *niph'al* infinitive absolutes are followed by second person *niph'al* imperfects of the same root. The form itself normally provides emphasis, and its repetition adds to that—thus *hibbôq tibbôq* (utterly laid waste) and *hibbôz tibbôz* (utterly despoiled). The two verbs involved here carry the content, but it is the form that conveys the energy in the divine threat. Williamson² has drawn attention to the irregular spelling of the imperfects in these two examples (the vowels are not those normally found in these roots), noting that “the spellings have been chosen for the sake of assonance.” So, in this example we have not only a repeated form but one that is also artificial in a grammatical sense. While most translations focus on the function of the Hebrew infinitive + imperfect form, the peculiarities of the form itself are ignored.

Verse 19 – The verse in its entirety consists of three phrases using the *qal* infinitive absolute with the *hitpolel* form of the same root plus the noun *'ereš* “earth.” Thus, *ṛō'ā hitrō'ā'ā hā'āreš* (the earth is utterly broken), *pôr hitpôrērâ 'ereš* (the earth is rent asunder), and *môt hitmôtētâ 'āreš* (the earth is violently shaken). Although it can be agreed that in the initial phrase the verb is found in its normal dress, the remaining two phrases use forms of the verb not attested elsewhere. This raises the distinct possibility that *hitpôrērâ* and *hitmôtētâ* have been constructed by analogy with *hitrō'ā'ā* in order to fit a pattern. Interestingly, NJPS renders the phrases as “the earth is breaking, breaking. The earth is crumbling, crumbling. The earth is tottering, tottering.” Although it may not be possible to highlight in any translation the fact that an author has manufactured a particular grammatical form, it is possible at least to highlight here that other function of repetition, namely, emphasis. How to do so sensitively is the challenge.

Verse 22 – Two phrases in which a verbal root in the *pu'al* is followed by a noun derived from that same root form the repetition here. Thus, *'ussēpû 'āsēpâ*

2 Williamson, “Sound, Sense and Language,” 2.

(they will be gathered together) and *suggērū ʿal-masgēr* (they will be shut up in prison). While this is a case of a repeated form, there is not a great deal of significance attaching to it perhaps, since it is a more regular feature of Hebrew syntax. This reminds us that there are times when the formal repetition itself is the important element in giving emphasis, while the content of the repetition merely indicates the sphere of emphasis.

2. Repeated phrases

Verse 6 – The discourse marker “Therefore” (*ʿal kēn*) is repeated here in order to emphasize the outworking of a curse upon the “earth” and its inhabitants for having broken the covenant. In this context it adds emphasis to the description of the fate of the people who are to be decimated.

Verse 8 – Here we note a repeated phrase *sābat mēsōs* (mirth . . . is stilled) plus noun, in which the noun of each phrase is a musical instrument: first the timbrel and second the lyre. The phrases speak of the end of all joyful celebration. The two repeated phrases form a bracket or *inclusio* around a synonymous expression, *ḥādāl šēʾôn ʿallîzîm* “the noise of the jubilant ones has ceased.” In this way the repeated phrases highlight that central clause and focus attention on its role as expressing the principal idea of the verse.

Verse 16 – The phrase *rāzî-lî rāzî-lî* (I pine away, I pine away) stresses the pain and suffering that contrast with the universal songs in praise of Yahweh, the Righteous One. It can be argued that the unusual form *rāzî-lî*, whatever its origin, establishes an alliterative relationship that contrasts with that of those who praise the Righteous One, *šēbî laššaddîq*.³

A second phrase, *bōgēdîm bāgādû* “the treacherous deal treacherously,” is not only repeated but heightened—*begeḏ bōgēdîm bāgādû* “the treacherous deal very treacherously.” This latter feature of poetic form is common in parallel statements, the repeated phrase adding to or strengthening the initial one. Both repetitions offer another form of emphatic statement, but for translators there is little chance that they will be able to match the kind of playful sound relationship that is also present in the original text.

Verse 17 – A compound phrase listing three dangers, *paḥad*, *paḥat*, and *paḥ* (terror, pit, and snare), is repeated in individual phrases in v. 18. The three are placed in verse-initial position in v. 17 as a way to draw attention to them. Their significance is then explained in the following verse. If one were to escape from the *paḥad*, one would fall into the *paḥat*. If one were to escape the *paḥat*, one would be captured in a *paḥ*. The fact that this same text can be found in Jer 48.43-44 raises the inevitable question as to its origin. Is this literary arrangement the work of Isaiah, of Jeremiah, or of another source from which both have borrowed? While many scholars (for example, Blenkinsopp, Clements, and Sweeney) regard this as having been borrowed by Isaiah from its original specific reference to Moab and applied more generally, it does represent a wider theme of inescapable judgment (see also Amos 5.18-20). Thus, we cannot claim that this particular literary feature

³ Although LXX omits this phrase, there is much textual support for MT. Its meaning seems difficult to establish beyond a doubt, but consensus is for a rendering similar to that of RSV, as here. See also Williamson, “Sound, Sense and Language,” 4.

is the creation of Isaiah, but it does have a place in the overall rhetorical richness of the chapter and of Isaiah's work generally.

For the translator, however, there is the challenge of trying to match the alliterative component that plays such a significant role in the phrase itself, quite apart from its repetition.

3. Repeated terms

The verb *bāqaq* "lay waste, destroy" in v. 1 sets the theme for the chapter's first section, and forms an inclusio in that it is repeated in v. 3. One function of the inclusio is to indicate the focus of a section of text. By marking the boundaries of a unit of thought it serves an important discourse function, and at the same time, as here, marks its theme by the repetition of the focus word.

Other terms or root words that are used frequently throughout the chapter and identify important themes or ideas are the following:

- 'umlāl* "be weak" (v. 4 twice, v. 7)
- 'ābal* "mourn" (vv. 4, 7)
- yāšab* "dwell" (vv. 1, 6, 17)
- mārôm* "heavens" (vv. 4, 18, 21)
- šā'ar* (*niph'al*) "remain, be left" (vv. 6, 12)
- šāmaḥ* "rejoice" (vv. 7, 11)
- šātā* "drink" (v. 9 twice)
- sāgar* "closed up" (vv. 10, 22)
- yām* "sea" (vv. 14-15)
- yayin* "wine" (vv. 9, 11)
- 'ereš* "earth" (vv. 1, 3-6, 11, 13, 18-20)
- pāqad* "visit upon" (vv. 21-22)

These repeated terms that are scattered throughout the chapter have the function of indicating the unity of a section, or of establishing a connection between one section and another. In this latter sense they can serve as keywords for an entire block of material when they are concentrated within a relatively small range of verses. The function of the repetition in such cases is that of marking boundaries in material that the author/editor considers to be cohesive. For translators, consideration should be given to rendering each term in a consistent manner rather than focusing on contextual meaning (where it could possibly differ) in order to highlight the cohesiveness of a section or block of material.

Since in the above we are dealing with structures within the text, retaining them places a demand on typesetters. Translators must give clear and precise guidelines to those responsible for typesetting a text whenever the form of a passage has a vital role in exhibiting content.

Assonance

Texts that were to be read and heard publicly, or to be sung, regularly used the device of assonance as an aid to hearers and to memorization. The benefit to hearers achieved by the use of sound patterns is readily acknowledged and widely used especially in oral stages of literary development. Words that have similar vowel

sounds or that rhyme with each other are very frequent in Hebrew because of the structure of individual grammatical forms. This applies for example to segholate nouns (*melek, derek*), participles (*qōṭēl, yōšēb*), and verbal forms (*niqṭal, niśmah*), each of which has a fixed vowel pattern that identifies them as belonging to a given class. In Isaiah 24 this feature can be seen operating extensively. By this rhetorical device the prophet is able to ensure that the message is more easily heard and grasped—if not accepted.

Many of the repeated forms and phrases noted above also feature assonance as an important additional element. We have referred to the repeated forms *hibbôq tibtôq* and *hibbôz tibtôz* in v. 3. Assonance is clearly a second feature of these phrases, as of the other repetitions. Similarly, *ʔābēlā nābēlā* (dries up and withers) in v. 4 sets up a sound pattern that draws added attention to its content. The rarely used *hitpolel* verb forms and their object noun *ʔereṣ* “earth” in vv. 19-20 set up another sound pattern that highlights the content of the verse, in this case the destruction throughout the earth.

The question that this feature poses for the translator has to do with whether or not the clever use of a given sound pattern has more than a mere decorative purpose or is an aide-mémoire. While it will be true that in some circumstances assonance simply gives expression to the author’s language skill (showing off), a good translator must ask the question about the function of the form, and if a special function attaches to it, then that is what a translator must reflect.

Alliteration

Many languages rely upon the repetition of consonantal sounds for powerful rhetorical effect. Hebrew is no exception. Indeed, given that there are only twenty-two consonants in the Hebrew alphabet and that most lexical items are composed of a combination of three of them, we can expect a great deal of sound repetition. Additionally, in light of the grammatical and syntactical structure of the language, in which verbal forms are developed from the same root (*ʔāmar . . . lēʔmôr*, “he said . . . speaking”), or in which the objects of verbs may be nouns formed from that same verbal root (*ʔākal ʔet-hāʔōkel* “eat the food”), alliteration can be said to be structured into the language. Examples of alliteration abound in this chapter as they do throughout the book of Isaiah. Again, we can point to most of the examples of repetition above and note that many of them depend on both assonance and alliteration for their increased literary impact.

Some further examples from Isaiah 24 will make the point.

- ḥānap* and *ḥālap* (v. 5)
- ʔābal* and *ʔāmal* (vv. 4, 7)
- ʔālep*-sounds in v. 6
- šāʔar, šāʔā, šāʔar* (v. 12)
- š-sounds (v. 12)
- paḥad, paḥat, paḥ* (vv. 17-18)
- ʔussēpū ʔāsēpā ʔassîr* (v. 22)

The effect of alliteration within a text is to make it pleasant to the ear, to assist hearers to note and retain the impact of the words, and to aid memorization.

Perhaps more important than these stylistic goals, however, is the way in which alliteration can often be associated with significant thematic components within the overall text and its message. For example, immediately prior to v. 13, which concludes the second section of the chapter, v. 12 summarizes the destruction that marks the earth. It is precisely in that summary in v. 12 that we find an alliteration that highlights the destruction (*šammâ*), speaking of what little remains (*š-ʿ-r*) of the city and the ruin (*šēʾiyâ*) of its gates (*šaʿar*). A similar explanation for the alliteration of the root *b-g-d* in v. 16 could apply, as it concludes the first subunit in the chapter's second section. In other words, alliteration can draw the reader's and hearer's attention to a statement of special significance and as such it represents a valuable rhetorical device.

Translators should at the very least attempt to reflect something of the alliterative sound pattern of the original while acknowledging that it may be near impossible in many languages since alliteration is very much a language-specific device. Nevertheless, it is the function of the form that is the main point here. Identifying the particular function of the alliteration in the Hebrew text should be matched with a similarly functioning form (if there is one) in the translated text.

Unusual terms and phrases

Poets are known universally for their creativity in the use of their language. Among the poetic materials of the Hebrew Bible, the poetry of Isaiah and the final editors of the book stands out as a remarkable example of the creative use of the full range of the Hebrew lexicon. There is probably no better exemplar than Isaiah when it comes to the use of *hapax legomena* and of the wide range of vocabulary items present in the Hebrew language. (We have already noted above that there are some verbal forms in Isaiah 24 that appear to have been "manufactured" to meet specific repetitional requirements.)

Within Isaiah 24 there are several examples of this familiarity with the fuller lexicon. As the second half of the chapter begins in vv. 14-15, with its theme of praise for God's majesty, the prophet uses the terms *yām* and *ʾūrîm*, literally "sea" and "dawn,"⁴ to represent the compass directions "west" and "east." While it is clear that the sea lies to Israel's west and that it is a term used in other contexts with that sense (e.g., 49.12; Josh 8.9; etc.), it is really only the context that points to the parallel term *ʾūrîm* in v. 15 as a reference to the east. As a poet, Isaiah uses the known representative term for the west, then creatively describes the east, not in the more traditional terms of the sun rising but of the light appearing. That these two terms are representative of the whole world is obvious, but when Isaiah wishes to refer more specifically to the "ends of the earth" an even more poetic phrase is used. In v. 16 we find the phrase *mikkēnap hāʾāreš*, literally "from the wings of the earth." The word *kānāp* "wing" is used as a figure for the extremity of something (see also 11.12; Job 37.3; 38.13). Although this use of *kānāp* is not unknown elsewhere (even in English in plural form!), it is certainly much less

⁴ The term *ʾūrîm* is problematic in the sense that its specific meaning is not certain. It is generally agreed that in the present context it is a plural noun derived from a root meaning "light" and that it refers to the dawn appearing from the east.

frequent and more poetic than the more common phrase *ʾapsê-ʾāreš* (Deut 33.17; Ps 2.8; Isa 45.22, etc.).

In v. 10 there is a unique phrase *qiryat-tōhû* “city of chaos” (NRSV and others). The reference to *tōhû* recalls the description of the earth in Gen 1.2. Although the noun is used occasionally elsewhere (e.g., Jer 4.23), it appears most often in Isaiah (see also 29.21; 34.11; 40.17, 23; 41.29; 44.9; 45.18, 19; 49.4; 59.4). Here in 24.10 the city so described represents the complete breakdown within human society. It is a most expressive phrase, linking with the cosmic dimension of the coming destruction.

We should perhaps include here the unusual term *šēbî* “honor” in v. 16. In the section beginning with v. 14, as noted above, there is a change in the theme to one in which Yahweh is praised, his glory and majesty honored. Two terms are used in this connection—*gāʾôn* “majesty” and *kābad* “to give glory”—both of which describe recognizing a person’s excellence. The term *šēbî* actually speaks of physical beauty, but in this context it refers to Yahweh’s honor. This seems to be the only place where it carries such a meaning. What this use shows is that the author/editor is not only aware of the broad range of lexical items that can be applied to a specific situation, but that individual terms can be nuanced in creative and distinctive ways.

The chapter concludes with v. 23, in which we note two other unusual terms—*lēbānâ* “moon” and *ḥammâ* “sun.” Both terms are actually adjectives serving as nouns; the first is the color “white,” and the second, “hot, heat.” As such they can be regarded as metaphors describing features of the objects they refer to, “white” representing the moon’s shining, and “heat” the sun’s warmth. Both *lēbānâ* and *ḥammâ* are rare terms. Both can be found in Isa 30.26 and Song 6.10, while *ḥammâ* “sun” is found also in Job 30.28.

What can or should translators do when confronted with features in a text such as these? When does content take precedence over form? Given that an author has gone to such lengths to express ideas in highly creative ways, I would argue that the form assumes greater importance than it might in some other circumstance where form seems to be little more than a receptacle for important content. In cases such as we have here in Isaiah 24, translators might be well advised to retain form and use footnotes to explain content. Certainly, in study Bibles this possible solution should be the first one attempted.

Plays-on-words

Wordplays are another typical rhetorical device found throughout all kinds of literature. They can be seen as a sign of the authors’ skill in the use of their language, as a kind of decorative feature that makes the text a little more interesting as an art form. A wordplay may consist of the use of a term that has multiple meanings (polysemy) by which an author may create a deliberate ambiguity; it may be the use of words that sound similar but have distinct meanings (homonyms).

We referred above to the repetitions in v. 16 in which the root letters *b*, *g*, and *d* feature. While the participle *bōgēdîm* and the verb *bāgādû* are clearly from the same root, the additional term *begeḏ* may in fact represent a play-on-words. The noun *begeḏ* can mean “treachery.” It also means “clothing.” And by extension, the

verbal form *bāgādū* can mean “they wear/clothe (themselves).” If this is, in fact, a subtle play-on-words, then the text is not just descriptive of the treacherous person but also expresses the full extent of their treacherous nature since they “clothe themselves with treachery.”

Other plays-on-words are to be found in the similarity of sounds in the many alliterations and assonances that dot this chapter. A specific example would be the use of *šā'ar*, *šā'â* and *šā'ar* in v. 12.

Although a good translator would at least give consideration to preserving the form of any wordplay, it may well prove so language-specific that it just cannot be done. On the other hand, since the wordplay represents an important formal element in the text, translators do need to add explanatory notes to accompany the text in order to allow readers to feel the full weight of the content. Here the form and content are equally important in the presentation and both must be represented.

Multiple parallel phrases

Hebrew poetry is known for, among other things, its use of parallel lines of text used to describe a given object or situation. Parallel lines can be of several types—synonymous, antithetic, synthetic, and so on—but their common feature is that they consist of at least two lines that are largely balanced with one another. They may follow an A-B-C / A-B-C pattern, adopt a chiasmic pattern of A-B-C / C-B-A, or be variations on these.

In the case of Isaiah, we can note what we might call an extended use of this rhetorical feature, the “piling up” of three (19.13; 21.5; etc.) or even four (11.2; 12.3; etc.) parallel clauses. The author’s ability to create such a device depends on the author’s knowledge of and ability to use the wide range of lexical items in the language.

Here in Isaiah 24 we find examples of this device, as might be expected. In v. 4 we have three parallel clauses:

<i>ʾābēlā nābēlā hāʾāreš</i>	the earth dries up and withers
<i>ʾumlēlā nābēlā tēbēl</i>	the world languishes and withers
<i>ʾumlālū mērôm ʿam-hāʾāreš</i>	the heavens languish together with the earth.

Similarly, vv. 8, 14, 19-20a are other examples of the extensive use of multiple parallel lines in groups of three or four throughout Isaiah.

The use of three and four parallel lines in many verses in the book of Isaiah can be said to be a special formal feature of the book and therefore a special feature of the author/editor’s literary style. While not unique, the fact that this device is used so frequently marks it as a peculiar element in Isaiah’s presentation. If we extend that notion, then the more developed form used in Isaiah can be said to offer even greater emphasis to the notion expressed in that verse than could be gained by a simple couplet.

Many so-called “modern” Bible translations have tended to collapse some of these extended parallel forms in poetic material into brief content-focused statements. This practice can be defended in some circumstances but I would argue that if an author has chosen to use and adapt a form such that it becomes a significant feature of the overall presentation, then it should be retained in

translation. This approach can be justified since it marks a work as typical of a document or author rather than reducing a wide variety of materials and authors/editors to some monochromatic sameness.

Conclusion

Although it has always been important in Bible translation to ensure that the content of a text is made as clear as possible within both its biblical and translational contexts, the importance of form has at times been neglected. Form is not merely the bearer or carrier of content; it can and often does play a vital part as its co-equal.

What we have seen in the above survey of Isaiah 24 is that where a form consists of repeated structures, be they repeated phrases or terms, that form has a vital function within the overall document. While, in one sense, repetition generally serves to give emphasis, that emphasis may also be an essential ingredient in determining content. That form needs to be honored and typeset to highlight it. The same applies to the use of parallel lines; the form has a function and when it is clearly an important element in an author's literary toolbox, it is a disservice if that form is not respected in the translation. Content will not suffer simply because vital formal elements are retained; in fact, form will enhance content and identify a body of material as belonging to an individual author, editor, or school of thought. It may also mark the cohesiveness of sections or other units of material.

Where language-specific components of form are present, such as assonance, alliteration, wordplays, and so on, every effort should be made by translators to emulate them as far as possible. If this cannot be done in the body of the text, then notes need to be provided. The reason is simple. If an author has chosen to present material in a special form, then it impacts on the content, sheds light on it, and so readers need to be made aware of that impact and its place as a content modifier.

Form? or Content? Sometimes it is not at all an "either-or" choice; it has to be "both-and."