

## INFANT NEGOTIATOR? GOD'S IRONICAL STRATEGY FOR PEACE:

A perspective on Child-figures in Isaiah 7-11, with special reference  
to the Royal Figure in Isaiah 9:5-6

H A J Kruger  
University of Durban-Westville

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### Abstract

*An attempt to design a hermeneutical model whereby the exegete/pastor/teacher may gain access to Isaiah 9:5-6 in order to address the current violent situation in South Africa. Ancient Near Eastern texts, views, and iconographical material as well as biblical trajectories are engaged to understand the passage. The central paradox of Isaiah 7-11, namely the focus on defenceless children as God's instruments for peace in a context of violence, leads the reader to avoid allegorical, moralistic, political, exemplary, and certain typological readings in favour of a messianic model supported by a socio-anthropological approach.*

### 1. The problem

The exegete (pastor/lecturer/schoolteacher) has to consider certain factors shaping the appropriation of these passages if, for example, he wants to address the current violent situation in South Africa. The question arises: how should the expositor understand this prophetic narrative which speaks of infants\children as God's 'signs' amidst a potential military conflict? (A theological and ethical question). What is the implication of this question for the teaching of Biblical Studies at university and school level? (A didactic question).

Some attempts to design a hermeneutical model by which access may be gained to the kerugmatic or teaching possibilities of this part of Scripture, are as follows:

Verhoef (1983:247-248) warns against three misguided approaches, namely the allegorical (everything takes on a certain spiritual meaning), moralistic (drawing moral lessons from the texts), and exemplary methods (persons and events mentioned in the texts are examples to be imitated or avoided). A

typological approach which summons the Christian communities (in South Africa) to faith that Yahweh will remove the enemies of the Church and which would result in peace, appears ill-considered. The Christian Community is not the only one threatened by violence. And: in the time of Judah the believing community and the political state were perhaps less distinguishable than today (Goldingay 1981:57). Nevertheless, this approach might again lead to any of the first three approaches in disguise. Nearer to the point is the question whether the child figures referred to in these passages, represent aggressors or peace-makers? <sup>1</sup>

Traditionally, Christian interpreters have noted a Messianic dimension in Isaiah 7:14, 9:5-6 and 11:1ff (see e.g. Ringgren 1961:30; Kaiser 1983:217-218; Watts 1985:98-104; 136-138; 167-176).

## 2. A brief look

A brief look at relevant ancient Near Eastern material and some hermeneutical issues may provide keys to the understanding of these passages.

Possible parallels with ancient Near Eastern material:

### 2.1 Texts

In the Akkadian hymn to the sun god, Shamash, a possible parallel to Isaiah 9:2 appears in the words: 'O Illuminator ... (in) the heavens, who makes the darkness bright ... above and below!' (Beyerlin 1978:102, footnote o).

The promise and birth of a son occurs in the Old Testament as a narrative motif (Isaiah 7:14, see Jdg 13:2-5; II Sm 1; II Kings 4:8-17; cf the common story-tellers' motif - Miller & Hayes 1986:60). This can be compared with the same motif and the same sequence in, for example, the Ugaritic Krt and Aqht texts: childlessness - promise of a son - birth of a son (De Vaux 1973:41; Westermann 1980:10, 132, 170ff; Zimmerli 1978:28). Such a child is endangered at first, but then grows up to be some important person (Hayes & Miller 1977:193). Other examples include: Sargon the Great of Akkad, the Hittite story of 'The Sun-God and the Cow', and the tale of Ullikummi (Beyerlin 1978: 223-224; Irvin-1977:192-193; ANET:121-125, 142-149). A few biblical passages, such as Genesis 21-22, and Exodus 1-2, speak of danger to the child, whereas the Ugaritic texts speak primarily of the children's happiness and the joy they occasion (Westermann 1980:175,176).

The announcement of the birth of a future ruler. Isaiah 7:14 uses the same words as the (Ugaritic) Nikkal text CTA 24: *hlg' lmt tld bn* (Aisleitner 1963: 2150; cf Gen 16:11; Jud 13:7; Lys 1967:178; Ringgren 1979:46-47; 223). Each new royal birth might become a sign. From Persian history we learn of the importance not of the birth of a baby girl, but of a baby boy as successor

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1. 'Light the darkness' - a generation suffering from violence - TV broadcast 19 May 1991.

to the throne (Snijders 1979:101). In Egypt co-regency may go back to the earliest dynasties, but by the Twelfth Dynasty had become a regular feature. The practice of co-regency ensured the succession and minimised the likelihood of a palace rebellion at the death of the king, that is, it made for a smooth transition from one reign to the next (Hallo & Simpson 1971:245). At least some scholars surmise a co-regency in the time of Ahaz (see Hayes & Miller 1977:683).

According to some authors, Isaiah 9:5-6 displays a coronation hymn and/or birth announcement (Kaiser 1983:212-213; Koch 1982:133; Watts 1985:137, but see Roberts 1987:379-380). De Vaux 1973:107-108 conjectures that a name was first given at the birth of a royal child, and then replaced by another (i.e. regnal) at the time of accession.

Following the announcement of a 'sprout' born of an '*almah*', a power struggle ensues (compare Isaiah 11:1 [7:14] with the Aramaean text noted by Ringgren (1979:239).

The return to paradise (see Is 11:1ff), is a common ancient Near Eastern theme (Miller & Hayes 1986:58; Snijders 1979:144).

The idea of the permanent taming of wild beasts is very old, and may be seen in, for example, the Sumerian Paradise Myth of Enki and Ninursag (< 2000 BC):

The lion kills not, the wolf snatches not the lamb (cf Isa 11:6ff; ANET 38, see Beyerlin 1978:85 footnote q; Holladay 1987:112).<sup>2</sup>

In the dream by which a glimpse of the nether world was revealed to the Assyrian prince (*Kummâ l-ya*), the boatman of the nether world bears the name: 'Remove Hastily' (Akk *Humut-tabal*), which reminds of Isaiah's son (Isa 8:3): 'Speed spoil, Haste prey' (see ANET 109, footnote 7).

Qaus was the chief god of the Edomites; he was later worshipped in North Arabia. The name *Qaus-gabr*, 'Qaus is a hero', or 'Qaus is bold', largely corresponds to the throne name '*El-gibbôr*' in Isaiah 9:6b (Beyerlin 1978:246).

The 'root' of the family to which reference is made in the Zakkar inscription, also appears in Isaiah 11:1 (see 11:10; 14:29 - Beyerlin 1978:232, footnote a; 233 footnote b).

## 2.2 Iconographical material

Warfare in the ancient Near East is depicted by iconographical material (Keel 1978:291-306). Cornelius (1989:41-60) has recently drawn attention to iconographical representations of Neo-Assyrian warfare (and atrocities) in the

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2. The ruin which comes as a result of the breach of treaty, as in, for example, the one between Katk and Arpad, parallels Isaiah 13:21ff at least in one respect, namely that wild animals will roam the area (Beyerlin 1978:529 footnote d).

eighth century BC. Iconographical depiction of child sacrifice is not certain (Keel 1978:234).

Some aspects of the vision of Yahweh on his throne (Is 6) has possible parallels with ancient Near Eastern iconography. Apart from other features, like the skirt of his robe, the seraphim referred to by the prophet (Isaiah 6:2), seem to resemble the snake-like figures found on Egyptian kings' crowns and elsewhere (Keel 1977:46-124). It is conspicuous that this literary unit in Isaiah (6-12; see Snijders 1979:17) opens with the reference to these snake-like figures as 'servants' of the throne (6:2), and concludes with a reference to harmless poisonous snakes (11:8).

The four- or five-fold throne name probably stems from Egypt (Wildberger 1980:381) and/or Syria (Kitchen 1966:109-110).<sup>3</sup>

According to Keel (1978:261), David appears to have possessed a five-fold regnal name, II Sam 23:1: 'David (1), son of Jesse (2), the man whom Elyon appointed (3), the anointed of the God of Jacob (4), the beloved of the Mighty One of Israel (5)'. Isaiah 9:5-6 probably represents an example of such a four- or five-fold name, or rather contains noticeable remnants of such a title (Keel 1978:261; De Vaux 1973:107). The king's name usually appeared in a *cartouche* or 'royal ring' (Gardiner 1964:12). Keel (1978:261) provides an example of an Egyptian throne name in iconographical shape. Schäfer (1974:352-355, plate 36) explains the symbols and emphasises the artistic form of a related monumental inscription which includes a *cartouche* probably produced in the Twelfth Dynasty under Amenehat (Amunemhet) III. Another example taken at random is the *cartouche* of king Siptah from the Nineteenth Dynasty (Hallo & Simpson 1971:300-301), carved on the doorway of his tomb (Romer 1981:207). The illustration given by Keel (1978:261) shows four of the possible five titles which constitute the 'great name' of the Egyptian king, Sesostris I.

## 2.3 Ancient Near Eastern Customs - overlapping with biblical ideas

### 2.3.1 Peace after war

Among all peoples of antiquity (including Israel) war, just as much as kingship or legislation, was linked with religion (Blenkinsopp 1984:113). This does not mean that every war was a religious war (De Vaux 1973:258). Closely linked to the latter is the fact that the consequence of war is peace. This peace included friendly relations between ancient peoples, guaranteed by a treaty (I Kings 5:26), and breaking the treaty is the equivalent of going to war (I Kings 15:19-20; cf Is 33:7-8 - De Vaux: 254). Conversely, war ends by the establishment of peace and this peace is the fruit of victory: 'to return in peace' from a campaign is a synonym for 'to return victorious' (Jdg 8:9; II

3. See Kaiser 1983:204, footnote 13; 212, footnote 59; Roberts 1987b:390, footnote 13.

Sm 19:25,31; I Kings 22:27-28; Jr 43:12 - De Vaux:258). Moreover, the weaker party, if it accepted peace-terms, was reduced to slavery. The outcome of a victorious war was always conquest by one side and vassaldom for the other, for example, David against Aram (De Vaux 254,255). The problem facing the exegete here is that some proponents of violence seize the information of these realities of the biblical past and use it as a basis to achieve their own aim. A Church which claims biblical passages, like those under discussion, as a basis for a theology of militarism (*Rapport*, 8-9-91:5), either supporting nationalist feelings or opposing it, seems to be heading for hermeneutical disaster. The following discussion will hopefully remove part of the basis for such claims.

### 2.3.2 Attitude towards war: quietism\pacifism\naturalism?

Some authors (e.g. Snijders 1979:95-96, Koch 1982:125) deny that the book of Isaiah represents a form of quietism, neutralism or pacifism.

It cannot be denied that Israel was forged as a nation in the crucible of warfare (Blenkinsopp 1984:66). According to some Old Testament passages, the tribes of Israel were actively involved in battle (e.g. the book of Joshua). Prophets were consulted and gave instructions in connection with war strategy (Koch 1982:27=35). However, other passages create the impression that the tribes were to remain passive even in the face of an attack by their enemies (e.g. Exodus 14:14). Israel's position in connection with war and violence is thus presented in an ambivalent way. But the two perspectives (of God and Israel's involvement in battle respectively) were probably reconciled as stated, for example, in I Chr 5:22: The two and a half tribes made war on the Hagarites (v 18,19), so that many Hagarites were killed (v 22), because God answered their prayer and because the war was of God's making (v 22).

Isaiah's summons to Judah to believe in the Holy One of Israel, may have included a call to arms in the confidence that God would destroy Judah's enemies by way of their own active participation in battle. Thus, apparently the idea of pacifism<sup>4</sup> cannot be extracted from Isaiah (or the rest of the Bible).

Other authors, however, e.g. Von Rad 1973:132-139; Gileadi 1982:194-195), observed that world empires of the time served as ahistorical, typological entities in the book of Isaiah. In these categories Isaiah presents Assyria as attacking Israel, but the real battle, he states, is between God and Assyria. The point to take is that 'the Assyrian shall fall by the sword, no human sword and no earthly sword' (Is 31:8), because Yahweh in person will 'come

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4. Later Jewish history bears witness to an example where violence was not resisted (1 Macc 2:29-38; Hayes & Miller 1977:585).

down to fight on mount Zion' (31:4b). Thus, statements on physical warfare were not viewed on an eschatological level (Longman 1982:293-302).<sup>5</sup>

### 2.3.3 Apocalyptic eschatology

The latter view can be underscored in the following way:

The vision of the King seated on his throne (Isa 6), while the Messiah appears in the vicinity of that throne (Is 9:1-6; 11:1-10), is a typical feature of apocalyptic literature (Dn 7:9-10; 13-14; Rv 4-5; 12:5;). Other features of apocalyptic material which appear in the first part of Isaiah, include: revelations (6:1), sealed testimonies (8:16), and raging wars (13:2ff; Russell 1976:205-390). When biblical passages breathe the air of the apocalyptic, as in the present case (Brodie 1979:29,31; Gileadi 1982:186-189; Watts 1985:xliv-xlvii), the exegete should be on the alert since apocalyptic as highly strung eschatology may alter the meaning of the relevant passages. One characteristic of apocalyptic literature which directly relates to the question of violence, concerns the tendency to move the struggle on earth to the supra mundane (Carroll 1979:154). Isaiah, dealing with these issues, follows suit (See Gileadi 1982).

### 2.3.4 Theological intention

The fact that Isaiah refers to world empires as ahistorical, typological entities, and that an apocalyptic-eschatological dimension can be detected in at least some respects of these passages, as well as the observation that some of the passages under discussion have their ancient Near Eastern parallels, should caution the expositor as to an exclusive historical approach regarding these passages or to base certain political models on the texts.

The author(s) of Isaiah no doubt had certain theological intentions (Hayes & Miller 1986:62-63), or what Koch (1982:121) has called 'metapolitics and metahistory'.

### 2.3.5 Provisional conclusions

The available information of ancient Near Eastern textual parallels (and customs) of passages involved highlight, but do not seem to advance understanding of the specificness (Goldingay 1981:51-55) of these Old Testament texts.

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5. This perspective may be traced back to the Exodus-narrative where the same idea appears (see Ex 14:13, 14, 24, 25, 27), and underscored by the invocation of the old battle name for God in Isaiah 9:5-6 (Watts 1985:135). As far as can be determined, the Israelites never engaged in battle against the Egyptians. It was a single combat (see De Vaux 1971:122-135) between the gods, Yahweh against the Pharaoh, the latter as representative of the Egyptian god(s) (Hornung 1983:135-142; Frankfort 1978:159-161).

Although the idea of pacifism can probably not be extracted from the passages concerned, Isaiah does not provide material from which a model for war or violence can be designed. He employs military references on an eschatological plane.

### 3. Biblical trajectories

Verhoef's approach (1983:247-248) to these passages moves along Old Testament 'trajectories' of God's kingship, his holiness, election and covenant, eschatology, and especially Messianic expectations (but see Gouws 1989:47-71).

The vision of Yahweh the Holy One of Israel on his throne dominates and forms the central idea of the 'Book of Immanuel' (Brodie 1979:27), which opens with a reference to 'the Holy One of Israel', and concludes with it (6:3; 12:6), thereby emphasising the particular character of Yahweh as of decisive importance for the understanding of the prophecy. This vision is also central to the whole book of Isaiah (Blenkinsopp 1984:118). Its message can be unfolded as a transformation of inherited traditions in the light of that central vision (Roberts 1987a:63; Verhoef 1983:248). The vision underscores Isaiah's claim to exclusive allegiance and unshakeable trust in Yahweh (Roberts 64). This claim is diametrically opposed to self-reliance, and reliance on anyone or anything other than Yahweh (respectively military preparation and political alliances with Assyria), in short, unbelief, <sup>6</sup> and hubris. <sup>7</sup>

Faith in Isaiah has a specific connotation. It means to regard Yahweh as faithful. For Isaiah this is a complete (*absolute* Zimmerli 1978:147) 'guarantee' in life. In the face of life's most difficult situations (the approaching of Judah's enemy), Isaiah summons to faith (7:9b; 28:16; 30:15 - Vriezen 1977:335,339). Thus faith implies renunciation of the hectic mobilisation and riding about described in 30:15-17 (Zimmerli 1978:196). A further refinement of the concept may be seen in the fact that to believe links up with the Davidic throne being kept firm (Roberts 1987a:70) and thus the sparing of the life of the promised child (Hayes & Miller 1986:343). In this connection, the meaning of faith can also be defined as 'to be poor', 'to have renounced hubris' - so 28:16 interprets the words of 14:32.

Against this background it must be pointed out that the actions of the Holy One of Israel are characterised by the paradoxical/ironical (Vriezen 1953:207). This is shown by, for example, Yahweh's blinding of his people,

6. Elsewhere in the Old Testament (1 Kings 22:1-40), a vision of Yahweh on his throne is followed by a tale describing the unbelief of people and kings (Snijders 1979:83). The same applies to the passages under consideration.

7. In the divine plan Assyria functions as Yahweh's agent for judging Israel (10:5-15 - Roberts 1987a:70). However, once Yahweh has purged his city with the aid of Assyria, at the last minute He turns upon arrogant Assyria and destroys that power (Roberts 1987a:71; Zimmerli 1978:196).

allowing foreign nations to invade their country, demanding faith in his protecting power in the face of intimidation, but especially (for the present purpose), the employment of children as his instruments in a situation of military conflict.

### 3.1 Setting and situation

Following Isaiah's vision of the Holy One of Israel, the scene is set in the second part of the 8th century BC.<sup>8</sup> God's people in Judah are in dire straits. Rezin of Damascus and Pekah of Israel want to force Ahaz, king of Judah, to join a coalition against their common enemy, Assyria. But Ahaz, unwilling to join the coalition, plans to ask Assyria to come to his aid against these two kings. This problem precipitated the course of events in Judah commonly known as the Syro-Ephraimite Crisis (*ca* 734-732 BC - Koch 1982:107; Miller & Hayes 1986:342-345).

Against this background Ahaz is confronted by Isaiah with the demands and promises of the Word of Yahweh. Isaiah functions as the *p yhw* (the mouth of the Lord - 1:20; Snijders 1979:99).

### 3.2 Structure

Isaiah 6-12 represents a self-contained literary unit (Snijders 1979:17), with chapters 6 and 12 serving as introduction and conclusion respectively (Brodie 1979:27). It covers the vision of the Holy One of Israel (ch 6), a military crisis (7:1ff), promises of deliverance for God's people (8:23ff) and a song of praise (12). Others take chapters 7-14 as a designation of the era of Ahaz because his name is mentioned in 7:1 and his death noticed in 14:28 (Watts 1985:78).

Brodie (1979:27-31) has pointed out that Is 7-11 (framed by ch 6: the throne of Yahweh, and ch 12: a song of praise), consists of eight (8) scenes, each of which contains a reference to a child-figure. At the centre of the scene the dual protagonists clash relentlessly, fear and faith pressing and pleading and thrushing without quarter. But now and then, he goes on to say, a shimmering presence fills the foreground, a harmless hope-filling boy, radiating all of life. The central debate dies, and the swords and horses are no more. This basic scene is reproduced again and again, eight times in all by Isaiah 7-11, sometimes with major variations. To increase the element of variety, we find, according to Brodie, that among the eight scenes there are three interludes, the first and third being carefully balanced (one dealing with the Day of Destruction, 7:17-25, the other with the Day of Restoration, 11:10-26), while the second, a powerful poem, towers in the centre (9:7-10:4).<sup>9</sup>

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8. But see Brodie (1979:30,31), and Koch (1982:132-134).

9. See Brodie (1979:27-31), and Watts (1985:85) for detail of the structure.



### 3.3 The child-figures

First on the scene we find the two sons of Isaiah (7:3; 8:3). The (Immanuel-) child referred to in 7:14 is probably the same as the one in 9:5 (Auret 1991:6; see De Vaux 1973:107,108), the former representing the promise, the latter its fulfilment (Lys 1967:179). A child counting the remaining number of Assyrian survivors (= trees - 10:19), a new birth from the house of Jesse (11:1), another driving cattle (11:6), and one playing at the hole of a serpent (11:8), complete the picture.

### 3.4 Child sacrifice

During times of religious syncretism but especially in times of political or military crises, human, that is, child sacrifices were made in the ancient Near East, a phenomenon which entered Judah from Phoenicia (De Vaux 1973: 80 footnote 20).<sup>10</sup>

There are at least two examples in the Old Testament of this type of action which took place during the monarchy. King Ahaz (II Kings 16:3) and Manasseh, his grandson (II Kings 21:6; II Chr 33:6), offered of their children as burnt-sacrifices. This was done to ward off a threatening crisis (De Vaux 1973:445). We may readily assume that Ahaz performed such an act during the Syro-Ephraimite crisis (Brongers 1970:156). The possibility also exists that the sacrifice of children mentioned in Isaiah 57:5 took place in the time of Manasseh (De Vaux 1973:446).

## 4. The central paradox

The prophet's answer: God's strategy for peace will involve children.

The prophet Isaiah, in an ironical twist of ideas, answers this outrage of Ahaz by snatching up the very idea of infants or child-figures and announces that a number of children will be God's agents ('signs and portents' - 8:18) for the liberation of Judah, if only the house of David would trust God (7:9). Ironically these 'signs' do not relate to military strategy (or machinery) in the usual way as one would expect, but to little children amidst a situation of war. The scene will be dominated by children, not soldiers.

### 4.1 Sparing the child

II Chr 28:7 notes that an unsuccessful effort was made to assassinate Ahaz either before or during the Syro-Ephraimite crisis. Not only the life of Ahaz, but also the lives of the entire reigning line of David would have been at stake (Is 7:2,13,17). The prophet Isaiah in offering encouragement to Ahaz in

10. See Lv 18:21; 20:1-5; Dt 12:2, 31; 18:10; I Kings 14:23; II Kings 17:10,31; 21:6; 23:10; Jr 2:20; 3:6; 32:35; Ezk 6:13; 23:39; Am 5:26; Hs 4:12ff; 9:11-14; Mi 6:7).

following his independent path did so by assuring him that, if the king acted in faith and relied upon Yahweh, the still unborn son of the royal family could function as a sign. In contrast to Menahem's slaughter of pregnant women (II Kings 15:16), this child would not be threatened or slaughtered (as his elder prince-brother - II Chr 28:7). In fact, the prophet promised that, while the child was still in its infancy, the lands of Ephraim and Syria would be devastated (Is 7:10-16; Miller & Hayes 1986:329,343). In addition, this child would become a king (9:5ff; 11:1ff).

The fact that God's promise of new births will go through (7:3;7:14; 8:3), does not only counter this threat, but also undergirds the reality of the continuous role taken up by children. Isaiah substantiates his reasoning by announcing that three new births will take place in the midst of the crisis:

Isaiah's (1st?) son: 7:3;

Ahaz' (?) son: 7:14;

Isaiah's (2nd?) son: 8:3.

Some scholars (e.g. Snijders 1979:103) assume that Isaiah 7:14 refers to the birth of Ahaz's son, Hezekiah, <sup>11</sup> a forerunner of the Messiah (Auret 1991:14). While recognising the chronological problems surrounding Ahaz and Hezekiah (Miller & Hayes 1986: 350-351), this idea is important if one accepts that Hezekiah's hour of birth overlaps with the hour of his ascending the throne (Auret 1991:12).

Thus not the death of a royal child (as burnt-sacrifice!) will solve the crisis, but its future role as king. This can only be realised if the child is allowed to stay alive. Ahaz' sacrifice of his son is diametrically opposed by Isaiah's emphasis on the importance of live children respecting future rulership in Judah. This aspect underlines the central paradox in Isaiah's conception of Yahweh's deliverance of his people. In the words of Oswalt (1986:245):

How will God deliver from arrogance, war, coercion, and oppression? By being more arrogant, more warlike, more coercive, more oppressive? Surely the book of Isaiah indicates frequently that God is powerful enough to destroy his enemies in an instant, yet when the prophet comes to the heart of the means of deliverance, *a childlike face peers at us*. God is powerful enough to overcome his enemies by becoming vulnerable (my italics).

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11. Hezekiah does not seem to have been Ahaz' eldest son. Ahaz apparently (as was said earlier) sacrificed one of his sons (II Kings 16:3), and another was killed in the attempt to overthrow him (II Chr 28:7). Though it is nowhere said that the king sacrificed his eldest son, this could be assumed, since to offer the firstborn rather than a younger son would have been a greater expression of religious devotion (Miller & Hayes 1986:350-351).

Now we can forget the idiom: this is no child's play! Isaiah is indeed the prophet of paradox (Vriezen 1953:207ff, see Von Rad 1973:122ff).

Nevertheless, Isaiah does not abandon the idea of the military in his address of the situation. To be sure, he continues in the same line of thought. He employs (the names of) children to serve as vehicles for his message. But these names display certain military undertones, something which enhances the mystery of our passages.

#### 4.2 A military dimension

The names of most of these children bear a warlike character.

##### Excursus

Elements of the names of Isaiah's two sons, namely, 'remnant' (7:3 *se ar*) and 'spoil/prey' (8:3 *salal/baz*) bear witness to a military dimension. 'Remnant' is associated with the reduced number of a people after war, namely the survivors (Is 14:22, cf Ezr 9:13,14, Jdg 12:4, Jenni & Westermann 1976 I:846). 'Spoil' and 'prey' relate to the result\effect of war. The people of Judah are frightened because of the threatening war. The names of Isaiah's sons assure them that at least some of them will survive (Kaiser 1983:140). The first part of the name (*Mahe-salal-has-baz*) can perhaps also be related to war. According to Aisleitner (1963 1522), the radix *mhr* relates to 'warrior' in the Ugaritic language and since Ugaritic is related to Hebrew, we may perhaps translate 'Warrior of the booty (see 9:2), hastening to spoil'. This expression then represents a disguised reference to the message contained in Isaiah 7:4ff, which holds forth a prospect of the defeat of the two enemy kingdoms and the plundering of their capitals by the king of Assyria (Kaiser 1983:181,182).

The theophoric name (De Vaux 1973:45) 'Immanuel' (7:14 - *immanû 'el*) also functions in the sphere of the military, namely in connection with the so-called 'holy (or *Yahweh*) war'. It may be explained in terms of the portrayal of battle and God's presence with his people. Indeed, the name means: 'God is with us' in the military situation (e.g. Dt 20:4; Jdg 6:16, 12ff; Nm 14:23; Js 1:9; 7:12; Müller 1980:124), in the wider context of the covenant (Dt 33:29; II Sm 7). Against this background and in this context we are introduced to another child who appears on the scene. The child bears a conspicuous four- or five-fold throne-name (Is 9:5\6). According to Holladay (1978:108-109), the throne-names of this marvellous figure make up a kind of symmetry: a governmental title ['Planner of wonders' - retaining his translations]; two divine titles in the middle ['God the war hero (is) Father forever'], and a governmental title again ['Prince of well-being']. This A-B-B-A pattern into which the throne-names is cast, apparently keeps the categories clear, since the two categories - the descriptive governmental

titles, and the theophoric divine titles - seem to be quite distinct in Isaiah's mind.

The first name *pele yô'es* can perhaps be translated as 'Intelligent (wise) Strategist', in the light of arguments offered by Caquot (1978:25-33), and Ward (1978:121-136; see Von Rad 1973:132-136; Koch 1982:137). This new king or actually new-born child will be a military strategist of the first rank whose marvellous plan will bring about deliverance for God's people (8:23ff).

Complementary to this name, the following one (*El-gibbôr*) may be translated 'Warrior God' (see Gen 49:25,26; Watts 1985:135), a fact which underlines the idea of a military strategist undertaking military action on behalf of his people (Müller 1980:124). He shall free them by breaking the checkmate of the present dilemma.

Although the third throne-name, *'abî 'ad* may be translated differently (Dahood 1979<sup>3</sup> II:81,82; Schultz 1981 II:645), some scholars accept the translation: (Father of) 'spoil' (cf Gn 49:27 - Kaiser 1983:204,209; Snijders 1979:122,123), a fact which again sets this figure squarely in the sphere of the warrior. The gathering of spoil and the redistribution thereof belonged to the main functions of an oriental monarch (Snijders 1979:123).

The word usually translated with 'prince' derives from *sar* and may also be translated as 'captain', or 'marshal'. According to Holladay (1978:107-108; see De Vaux 1978:254), in Judges 8:9 means 'military success'. So a captain of *salôm* in Isaiah may refer to the king as successful against foreign threats as well as a sponsor of prosperity at home. Later on in the same episode, Gideon calls his newly-built altar: *Yahwe salôm* (Jdg 6:24). Isaiah 9:4 refers to Gideon's setting free of the tribes of Israel from the Midianite yoke. The *sar salôm* reminds of *Yahweh salôm*. See Ps 120:7: *anî salôm*). The *sar salôm* supervises the normalisation of relationships, and the return of the good and blessed life, after a period of hostility (Snijders 1979:123). This idea runs through victory to its consequences, which is peace (Kaiser 1983:213).  
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The reference to peace appears for the first time in Isaiah 9:5-6 and then constantly throughout the book. In the earlier mentioned Egyptian peer of Isaiah 9:5-6, an aspect of the royal titulary expresses the idea of 'repeating births', or 'renaissance', proclaiming 'a new era' (Hallo & Simpson 1971:244).

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12. Some have argued that these titles are part of a polemic against the Assyrians, attacking the extravagant claims made by the Assyrians monarchs about their wisdom and power (Oswalt 1986:246) e.g. the use of *sar* (=prince) instead of *melek* (=king) is a conscious reflection of the Assyrian word for king, i.e. *sarrum* (Oswalt 241, footnote 5; Caquot 1978: 25-27).

Thus, the outcome of the action of the 'Intelligent Strategist' (9:5-6) is peace, portrayed in terms of an idyllic (paradisaical) picture of a boy driving cattle and one being unharmed by man's arch enemy, the snake (11:6,8f; Gn 3:15).

Returning to Is 9:5-6 it becomes clear that the whole passage (8:23-9:6) is encapsuled by the formula: 'The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do it'. The word 'zeal' is sometimes taken as 'warrior combativeness', 'pugnacity' (i.e. the fighting spirit) of the soldier (Snijders 1979:124; cf Is 42:13). The possibility still exists that the expression 'Lord of hosts' means the 'Lord of (Israel's) armies' (see De Vaux 1973:259; Vriezen 1977:322, footnote 1; 323 footnote 4), another two indications that we have the idea of (holy) war before us.

If the 'branch from the stock of Jesse' (11:1) refers to a Davidic descendant in his boyhood (*ben*, 9:5-6, cf Sm 16:18), the figure of 11:2 has at his disposal the spirit of (ia) strategy and military might at a youthful age (cf Is 36:5; II Ki 18:20).

The threat from the side of Assyria will be futile when *Yahweh* punishes its king (Isa 10:12-24). The Assyrians will be reduced to such an extent that a small child will be able to count the remaining number. In the following verses reference is made to the 'remnant' of Jacob and Israel (10:21-22) which will return. Again within a short period the Assyrian threat will disappear (v 25). The feature to be noted is the link between child and returning remnant (vv 19a-b, 21-22). It reminds us of the name of Isaiah's son (7:3).<sup>13</sup>

The idea that these child-figures will act thus, that is, to clean up all adversity while in reality it is *Yahweh* himself who acts, is not so far-fetched, though. From 9:5-6 we learn that the child-figure is called *pele' yô'es* (translated as 'Wonderful Counsellor' or 'Intelligent Strategist'). But *Yahweh* himself is also called by that name (28:29). The same applies to '*el gibbôr*' (10:21). The intelligent strategist must be the Messiah.

We must now return to the expression, the 'Holy One of Israel'. If the name '*Yisra 'el*' means 'God (El) fights' (root:*srh* I; see Gn 32:29; Hs 12:5; Gerleman 1975:782; Müller 1980:124), then we have a further indication that the idea of war dominates the scene of Is 6-12 (see Schmidt 1983:97).

The words of Ex 14:14: 'Yahweh will fight for you so hold your peace', determine the tone of the expression of the war speech that the priest addresses to the assembled army (Dt 20:1ff). These are almost exactly the words spoken by Isaiah in his exhortation of Ahaz during the Syro-Ephraimite crisis (Is 7:4). Even the demand that Israel must

13. See Williams (1989:40-41) for a discussion of the sundial as another sign.

'believe' and 'have faith' is rooted in the ideology of the Yahweh War and refers to the attitude that springs from knowledge of Yahweh as the giver of victory (Zimmerli 1978:62,194).

Thus the vocabulary of this passage is quite militaristic in character (Holladay 1978:105): the names of these child-figures reveal a military dimension - evidence which bears witness to the ironical in the prophecy. Isaiah deserves to be called the prophet of paradox (Vriezen 1953:207, see Von Rad 1973:122).

## **5. Other possible hermeneutical keys**

### **5.1 Ps 8**

Another angle of incidence by which the expositor can possibly find a hermeneutic to the understanding of the child-figures of Isaiah 7-11, may start with a look at Ps 8:3.

If the exegete adheres to the Masoretic Text which seems to take Ps 8:3 (2) as one sentence,<sup>14</sup> it is clear that the idea of the establishment of God's 'stronghold', 'defense', 'bulwark' ('oz) through (the mouths of) babes is intimately connected to that of keeping his enemies at bay. What is uttered by babes can, in God's sight, be more powerful than enemies. Kraus (1978:207) suggests that *mippî* (Ps 8:3) be taken as an abbreviated expression for 'from the praise of mouth' (*aus dem Lob des Mundes*).

This should be seen against the background of God's 'paradoxical' actions in the world (Vriezen 1953:207-215). He chooses to maintain his honour and his people through a vulnerable means (Isa 2:11-18).

The exegete can only surmise that the same idea, but in different form, is presented in Isaiah 7-11. However, one difference between this Psalm and Isaiah 7-11 is the absence of any speech from the mouths of the child-figures in the book of Isaiah.

The fact that children are involved in the way stated, demonstrates that God accomplishes his great acts through apparently insufficient means revealing his power in the process (Kraus 1978:207). Through the stammering praise of children *Yahweh* builds a bulwark, a staying power against his enemies which will eventually bring about their downfall. Kraus suspects that the final downfall of all enemies through God's intervention, has its hidden preludes in the indicators of salvation expressed in the prayers of the pious. An example of this bulwark against God's enemies may be found in the praise of children.

Another possible way of understanding the passages referring to the child-figures, is the idea of

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14. Cf e.g. the translation of the Afrikaans Bible 1983 over against the Revised English Bible 1989.

## 5.2 Children as 'signs and portents'

This relates to how the book of Isaiah itself presents the child figures. Isaiah 20:3-4 may serve as an example: the prophet acts the mode of Egypt's deportation. He represents a 'sign and a portent' (20:3)<sup>15</sup> to Egypt and Cush. In its reference to Judah, the combination of these words points to the truth of God's Word (Snijders 1979:105), as well as his miraculous deeds toward his people.<sup>16</sup> Of the child-figures referred to by Isaiah, at least the first two are called 'signs and portents' (7:3; 8:3; 8:18 Snijders 115) and the third a 'sign' (7:14). The first two names represent the reality that Samaria and Damascus will soon cease to be a threat to Judah. Snijders (115) calls this phenomenon: 'profetie-in-nuce'. The Immanuel-child (7:14) represents God's presence and Judah's survival (Brodie 1979:28). The other three children represent the reality of forthcoming peace. In the ancient Near East a particular circumstance sometimes provided the inspiration for a child's name. In this connection the symbolic names given by Isaiah to his sons (Is 7:3; 8:3; cf 7:14; 9:5) reveal 'the expression of hope' (De Vaux 1973:43,44) that the Syro-Ephraimite crisis (734-732 BC) may soon be something of the past (see Miller & Hayes 1986:342-345).<sup>17</sup> In this situation, the prophet and his sons function as 'signs and portents'.<sup>18</sup>

## 5.3 Provisional conclusion

These two perspectives (derived from Ps 8:3, and the 'signs and portents') support the idea that God employs the unexpected, in this case, a fragile means to display his control of events. One may infer from this discussion that it ironically pleases God to use apparently vulnerable agents to accomplish the liberation of his people. God's power paradoxically resides in defenceless children. However, the latter do not function as soldiers, but as 'signs' of God's power. But still, we have not been able to rid ourselves of the haunting idea of the military, in spite of the fact that it became clear that the names of the children serve (only) as symbols for divine action. Before this issue can be addressed, attention must be given to the development of thought as regards the child-figures.

15. The words 'signs and portents' appear repeatedly in the Exodus narratives (Snijders 1979:115) and are employed interchangeable, for example 4:8 and 4:21. A sign often contains a hidden meaning and needs to be interpreted. It embodies some reality (Snijders 206).

16. For the coupling of 'sign and portend' see Dt 4:34; 6:22; 7:19; 29:2; 28:46; 34:11; Jr 32:21; Ezk 12:6; Zech 3:8 (Kaiser 1983:197, footnote 17).

17. According to Gottwald (1987:379-380) the irony of the prophet in pointing to the radically different courses of events that would be set in motion depending on the king's choice, is starkly underscored by the double-edged meanings carried by each of the symbolic names of the three children (*se 'ar-jasüb*, 7:3; *'immanü 'el*, 7:14; *maher-salal-has-baz*, 8:1,3) with their explosive potentiality for threat or promise.

18. Other 'signs' include the kings as 'smouldering firebrands' (7:4), the Assyrian as a 'barber' (7:20), the gentle water contrasted with the floods (8:6-8) and the 'stone of stumbling' (8:14. cf 7:8-9a,10,14; 8:1-4,18,19,23; 9:5-6 - Watts 1985:84).

Apart from serving the author's intent to mark the ironical way in which God will liberate Judah, these child-figures are also employed by the author to develop another idea, namely of a coming (eschatological) Ruler.

## **6. Children: 'scaffolding' for the Child**

Relevant passages in Isaiah 7-11 reveal a movement of thought from, or oscillation between

### **6.1 The divine to\and the human**

#### **6.1.1 Yahweh's actions**

On the one hand, Yahweh's performance is represented as standing behind all the events recorded in these passages. One can refer to Isaiah 9:6 where it is stated that the 'zeal of Yahweh' will accomplish all. And all along, the mighty deeds recorded of the (coming) Redeemer, can be traced back to the fact that God in reality is the Warrior (*'el gibbôr* 9:5-6, compare 10:21). The Child is called *pele' yô'es*, the epithet used of God himself (28:29; cf Ps 77:15).

#### **6.1.2 Human features**

Subsequently, we find that these passages are tempered with humanity. A *sar* remains subordinate to a king, in this case Yahweh, to whose throne the *sar* is summoned as governor (Von Rad 1965:172).

Brodie (1979:29) infers from his outline of chapters 7-11 that a clear distinction is made between Isaiah and his children on the one hand, and the single figure of Immanuel on the other. The identity of Immanuel with the Davidic prince (and therefore the Shoot of Jesse, i.e. David's father) seems to be assured by the fact that the Immanuel and the Davidic prince both represent the presence of the one God. And just as there is a continuity between the children of Isaiah (scenes 1,3,5, and 7), so we would expect a continuity between Immanuel (scenes 2,4) and the Davidic Prince (scenes 6,8 - Auret 1991:6; De Vaux 1973:107-108). Thus Immanuel ('God with us') can be seen as the introduction of the theme of God's presence, in spite of all the uncertainty and danger (Verhoef 1983:250), and the other titles (Davidic Prince and Shoot of Jesse) as its elaboration.

Despite all the special effects of an apocalyptic dimension (see Gileadi 1982) in Isaiah 6-12 (Brodie 1979:30), namely visions, revelations, sealed testimonies, and raging wars - the reader's attention is caught again and again by the child. When all is said and done, it is a human being who best represents the reality of God, and the reality of his people. Thus one can conclude that already in Isaiah a type of incarnation has occurred. God to



some degree has taken human form, at least in writing (Brodie 1979:30; Verhoef 1983:250).

A second development of thought appears in the movement of

## 6.2 Adult to children

Children are summoned to tasks demanding the wisdom of adults. It is remarkable that a child is charged with the task of a ruler (*sar*). Again we note the paradoxical.

There is a further progression of thought from

## 6.3 Children to a Child

### 6.3.1 Children in the 'Ahaz-section' (Watts 1985:102).

All the references to children related to the Syro-Ephraimite/Assyrian threat, appear in chapters 7-11.

### 6.3.2 David/Hezekiah in the Ahaz-section

The prophet's appeal to Ahaz to exercise faith is based on the double promise of God concerning Jerusalem (Zion) and the Davidic Dynasty (Is 7:7-9; Zimmerli 1978:147). Isaiah's coronation oracle, presumably for Hezekiah (8:23-9:6 - Auret 1991:12), and his prediction of a new shoot from the stump of Jesse (11:1-5), come out of the same conceptual world as this traditional royal theology (Roberts 1987a:70).

### 6.3.3 Messiah in the Ahaz-section

It is significant that all the passages that explicitly deal with Messianic themes related to the Davidic dynasty occur in the Ahaz-section of the vision (7:1-16; 9:5-6; and 11:1-5, 10 - Watts 1985:102).

The child figures thus provide a framework for the development of a Messianic dimension related to the (one) Child. He appears to represent a corporate function. In this connection we are reminded of the relation between the Servant Israel and the Servant Yahweh in Isaiah 40-66. Snijders (1979:111) compares the two stating that the Immanuel (7:14) is an individual and a corporate personality, the embodiment of the whole: He represents the survival of the whole house of David (Gileadi 1982:172; 199 footnote 50, 202-203).

We must now return to the question of the military idea related to the royal Messiah.

## 6.4 Military to non-military: PEACE

The attributes which describe the endowments of the future King of chapter 11:1 ff, fit the first throne names in chapter 9: *yô'es* - '*esa*', see 28:29; *gibbôr* - *geburâ*; for *pele'*, see 11:3b; for *седаqa* see 11:4ff (Koch 1982:135).

It is clear from this comparison that there exists some continuity between chapters 9 and 11 (Auret 1991:6). But a certain tension remains between this figure's more warlike qualities on the one hand, and the peaceful ones on the other: on the one hand he bears names relating to war (9:5a-g), on the other to peace (9:5h). The figure represents a warlike character and a wisdom going beyond a violent characteristic (11:2a-b,d).

But as the scenes progress (Brodie 1979:30), the prophet, and this is the heart of the matter, seems to move away from the military sphere towards the idea of a peace negotiator (9:5-6: *sar salôm*), a prince without warlike qualities (11:1ff). Beginning with children pointing to a military situation (7:3;8:3), the scenes thus move forward to children in a paradisaical atmosphere (11:6-8). Again: Isaiah links up with the military situation by giving names with military meanings to children who function as part of his message to the king of Judah. However, he eventually separates the military from the non-military idea by discharging the children of any military action, and moves ahead to an atmosphere of bliss.

In connection with the latter it needs to be noted that for Isaiah *ruah* is the vehicle of wisdom. It no longer only communicates warlike qualities. Isaiah 9:6 (*pele' yô'es*) already places a wisdom predicate in the foreground. But now awareness, knowledge, and reason are made pre-eminent in quite a different way and determine the nature of the new kingdom (Koch 1982:135). Although he is endowed with the gifts necessary for success in war (*Geburâ* 9:6; 11:2), the Messiah only comes on the scene after *Yahweh*, as divine Warrior, has himself destroyed the superior Assyrian power (9:4; 10:21ff; cf 10:5ff; 31:8ff; 32:1ff). In this way, the Messiah is driven into a strange passivity: He exercises his just dominion only after victory is already won (Schmidt 1983:201). *Salôm*, to the extent of peace in the animal world, is the ultimate end of his rule (9:6ff; 11:6ff). Thus Isaiah eventually thinks of this *ruah* quite apart from any warlike deeds.

## 7. Conclusions

### 7.1 Messianic model

It has hopefully become clear that *Yahweh* uses defenceless children as symbols of his power during the Syro-Ephraimite crisis. However, these child-figures are distinguished from another Child, the Messiah.<sup>19</sup> Since the

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19. A form of messianism applied in the African context may be seen in the constitution of the Malawi Congress Party, which includes among titles to be used exclusively in honour of the President of Malawi, Dr H K Bana, the term 'saviour' and 'messiah'. The president is praised

outcome of the Messiah's action is peace, a concept which the New Testament authors linked to the work of Jesus Christ, this model may provide a valuable guideline for the Christian Church to address the current violent situation in South Africa. The Messiah's claim that he is capable of bringing about peace, brings in its train a summons to faith.<sup>20</sup>

## 7.2 Socio-anthropological model

Although Isaiah states that the present leaders of Judah are comparable to the inconsistency of children (3:1-15), he does not denigrate children as such and finds them worthy to serve his setting up of a 'youth culture' (Holladay 1978:52). Isaiah's view that to make boys the princes of the land (Is 3:4), is a punishment rather than a liberation. But this will strike us as reactionary. In Western (the last decades) and African countries young people play an important role in society. Nevertheless, it must be emphasised that the Old Testament in general is not automatically pro-the-older-generation and con-the-younger-generation (cf Gn 12:1; Joel 3:28; Jr 1:6-7), or the other way round. Isaiah himself looked to a child as a sign of new hope when his country was in trouble (Holladay 1978:52).

It has been observed that children are capable of assessing, analysing and commenting on the world around them. Thus children can play an important role in bringing about peace in South Africa. At present, however, instead of contributing to a peaceful situation in South Africa, children are frequently exposed to acts of extreme violence (Bulletin June 1991:4). But by being properly instructed in schools, children can be the bearers of the reality of peace. The concept of peace as part of the subject of Biblical Studies in schools and universities can contribute to normalising relationships in South Africa.

## 7.3 Political or moral models?

In connection with what was said above, it must be stated that these passages cannot be harnessed for purposes of a political nature of either resistance to joining in with a 'United States of Canaan' policy (Ahaz' refusal of Israel/Syria's 'proposal' to this effect), or by alliance with one of the power blocks (Ahaz' submission to Assyria); neither a view which opposes all practical political processes to solve problems, nor one that deals with these

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by members of his Parliament in, for example, the following words: 'Long live the Ngwazi, *messiah* of the nation (my italics) (Hansard of the Malawian Government - 29 th March 1989:869). Naturally, this exclamation could be taken in a 'secular' sense, by which the president is hailed for what he has done for his country's independence and development. But it could be a serious misconception. A messianic dimension can be detected in our passages, but this can never be extended to any contemporary human being (see Ramashapa 1990:582-588).

20. Kaiser 1983:217-218. See Lv 19:36; Dt 25:15; Jr 29:7 - Wright 1983:135.

passages under the viewpoint of man's eternal oscillation between faith and incredulity (Lys 1967:177,180).

Drawing political parallels are necessarily artificial, and would contravene the author's intent, since today no nation can take the place of Israel whose true continuation is the Church.

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