FROM DEFIANT CHILDREN TO CONTENTED BABES:
AN EXPLORATION OF RELATIONAL METAPHORS FOR ISRAEL
IN THE FRAME OF ISAIAH (CHS. 1 AND 65–66)

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From beginning to end, the book of Isaiah teems with metaphors, interwoven like threads in a complex tapestry. Some of these threads represent Israel in their identity as the people of YHWH, particularly the five metaphors that arise from the realm of household relationships—Israel, a remnant/representative of Israel, and its capital city are variously described as sons/children, daughter(s), wife, mother, and servant(s). These metaphors intertwine to produce a complicated portrait of the relationships involving people, city and YHWH, as each party occupies multiple places in the household order.

Yet despite the apparent conflicts between them, a few scholars have noted the usefulness of approaching these metaphors together. For example, in connection with his work on Hosea, Andrew Dearman asks “if it is not possible to see the different roles of spouse, parent and child in the book as part of a larger root metaphor of the family (or better household) in Israel’s cultural milieu” and suggests that seeing Israel as “YHWH’s house” might provide “the conceptual key to the familial imagery.”¹ Leo Perdue acknowledges the centrality of these metaphors in Israelite thought, contending that “the household . . . became the primary lens through which to view the character and activity of God [and] the identity and self-understanding of Israel in its relationship to God.”² Thus analyzing these crucial metaphors together will

¹ Andrew Dearman, “YHWH’s House: Gender Roles and Metaphors for Israel in Hosea,” JNSL 25 (1999): 106–7; see also idem, “Daughter Zion and Her Place in God’s Household,” HBT 31 (2009): 155; Leila Leah Bronner, “Gynomorphic Imagery in Exilic Isaiah (40–66),” Dor le Dor 12 (1983): 82, who contends that “[t]he family is the centre of all [Second Isaiah’s] metaphors, similes and personifications.”

provide a greater understanding of how the book of Isaiah portrays Israel’s identity as the people of YHWH.

After a century of Isaiah scholarship focused on historical-critical issues, seeking to discern the development of the various strata of the book, many scholars are now noting that, whatever the book’s origins, several unifying features appear throughout its three major sections. These unifying images, themes, and motifs serve as evidence of intentional shaping on the final form of the book and provide a foundation for reading the book as “a complex unity,” perhaps even with an underlying “narrative substructure.” As any good reader knows, the quickest way to gain an overview of a book is often to read its introduction and conclusion. This strategy is particularly effective for reading the book of Isaiah since, as several scholars have suggested, Isa 1 and 65–66 were probably intentionally shaped to form an inclusio, providing a thematic framework for the book as a whole. Therefore, this paper will examine how Isa 1 and 65–66


use relational metaphors to sketch Israel’s portrait, noting in particular how these metaphors function rhetorically in their contexts and how they contribute to the character development of both people and city from the beginning of the book to its end.

**The First Act: Isaiah 1**

The People of Israel as YHWH’s Rebellious Children

The curtain opens in Isa 1 on a series of interlinked scenes portraying the disordered state of “YHWH’s house”—his בנים are defiant and his בת is isolated and vulnerable. Although the chapter may consist of several originally independent oracles, the various parts are linked together by catchwords and form a rhetorical unity, which introduces many of the book’s major themes. To understand the rhetorical function played by the בנים and בת metaphors, it is helpful to examine the chapter’s communicative aim in light of its implied rhetorical situation—that is,

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Beuken provides the most complete list of common vocabulary but ultimately concludes that only 66:22–24 provides evidence of an intentional effort to echo ch. 1 (W. A. M. Beuken, “Isaiah Chapters LXV–LXVI: Trito-Isaiah and the Closure of the Book of Isaiah,” in *Congress Volume: Leuven 1989* [ed. J. A. Emerton; VTSup 43; Leiden: Brill, 1991], 218–21). Based on a similar sequence of thematic parallels, Tomasino argues that 1:2–2:4 provided the structural framework for 63:7–66:23 (excepting ch. 65). He also notes vocabulary links between the beginning and ending verses of chs. 1 and 66, contending that these connections were added by a later editor (“Isaiah 1–1:2:4 and 63–66,” 95–97). Yet since Isa 65 displays many links with Isa 66 as well as with Isa 1 and 63:7–64:11 [Eng. 12], its relationship with those passages deserves more consideration than Tomasino offers. Carr contends that parts of Isa 1 and 65–66 were likely written in relation to one another but does not see here a redactional intention to produce “a cohesive, literary whole.” He argues instead for a reader-centered approach, declaring that the interconnections between these passages “open up a wide range of interpretive possibilities for modern readings of the Isaiah tradition as a whole” (David McLain Carr, “Reading Isaiah from Beginning [Isaiah 1] to End [Isaiah 65–66]: Multiple Modern Possibilities,” in *New Visions of Isaiah* [ed. Roy F. Melugin and Marvin A. Sweeney; JSOTSup 214; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1996], 217).

the attitudes or behaviors or general historical circumstances it appears to address. The clearest indicators of the chapter’s rhetorical situation come in vv. 5–9, which metaphorically describe Israel as a body bruised and bloodied from head to foot (vv. 5–6) in order to communicate that the country has been overthrown by foreigners and is now desolate (v. 7). Only Zion has survived the siege and remains sitting alone (v. 8). Indeed, the decimation of the people would have been like that of Sodom and Gomorrah had not YHWH in his mercy preserved a remnant (v. 9).7

Verses 10–15 then condemn Israel for performing rituals with “hands [that] are full of blood” (v. 15).8 Because of the people’s moral failings (see vv. 16–17), YHWH will no longer accept their sacrifices. Reading between the lines, vv. 5–17 as a whole could suggest that the passage is addressing a situation in which the people are confused about the apparent inconsistency between their religious observance and their recent experience of devastation. That is, they may be questioning why YHWH seems to be punishing them when they have not been neglecting his cult.9

The passage begins with a courtroom scene.10 Like the parents of the rebellious son in Deut 21:18–21, YHWH brings an accusation against his children before an audience—in this

7 Most commentators understand these verses to reflect the situation of the Assyrian invasion of Judah under Sennacherib around 701 (e.g., H. G. M. Williamson, Isaiah 1–5 [ICC; London: T&T Clark, 2006], 63–64; John T. Willis, “The First Pericope in the Book of Isaiah,” VT 34 [1984]: 75; Christopher R. Seitz, Isaiah 1–39 [IBC; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1993], 32), though identifying the precise historical event is not important to understanding the general rhetorical situation.

8 All translations are mine unless otherwise noted.


case, before the heavens and the earth,\textsuperscript{11} who function as witnesses.\textsuperscript{12} YHWH is both prosecutor and judge, declaring:

\begin{center}
\begin{tabular}{ll}
2b & Children\textsuperscript{13} have I raised and brought up, but they have rebelled against me.  \\
3 & The ox knows his owner \\
4 & Alas sinful nation, a people heavy with iniquity, offspring of evildoers, children who deal corruptly.
\end{tabular}
\end{center}

YHWH contends that he has fulfilled his parental role\textsuperscript{14} toward his children, investing great time and energy in caring for their needs,\textsuperscript{15} but his parental efforts have been repaid only by stubborn


\textsuperscript{12} In Deut 21:18–21, the parents are called to bring their accusation before the town elders, who serve as judge and jury (see Elizabeth Bellefontaine, “Deuteronomy 21:18–21: Reviewing the Case of the Rebellious Son,” \textit{JSOT} 13 [1979]: 24). Darr makes the comparison between Isa 1 and Deut 21 but fails to distinguish between the role of the universe in the former and the elders in the latter, calling both “witnesses” (Isaiah’s Vision and the Family of God [Literary Currents in Biblical Interpretation; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994], 57).

\textsuperscript{13} Although \textit{בְּנֵי} could be translated as “sons,” references to YHWH’s \textit{בְּנֵי} throughout Isaiah seem to point to the people of Israel as a whole, not just its male members. Moreover, the highlighted aspects of the metaphor are characteristics common to both male and female children.

\textsuperscript{14} The text does not specify whether YHWH should be understood as a father or mother in this verse. Both Deut 32 (v. 6) and Isaiah (63:16; 64:7 [8]) address YHWH as “father,” while YHWH is not explicitly called “mother” anywhere in the OT. Nevertheless, Deut 32 (v. 18) and Isaiah (42:14; 45:10; 49:15; 66:13) also use maternal imagery for YHWH, suggesting that YHWH transcends gender categories (for further discussion, see Rainer Kessler, “‘Söhne habe ich großgezogen und emporgebracht . . . ’ Gott als Mutter in Jes 1,2,” in \textit{Ihr Völker alle, klatscht in die Hände! [Exegese in unserer Zeit 3; Münster: LIT, 1997], 146–47; Brent A. Strawn, “‘Israel, My Child’: The Ethics of a Biblical Metaphor,” in \textit{The Child in the Bible} [ed. Marcia J. Bunge, Terence E. Fretheim, and Beverly Roberts Gaventa; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008], 108; Norbert Clemens Baumgart, “Wenn JHWH Kinder erzieht: Zum Gotteshild im Jesajabuch aus religionsgeschichtlicher und kanonisch-intertextueller Perspektive,” in \textit{Das Echo des Propheten Jesaja: Beiträge zu seiner vielfältigen Rezeption} [ed. Norbert Clemens Baumgart and Gerhard Ringshausen; Münster: LIT, 2004], 11, 19).
defiance and rejection. Verse 3 highlights the incomprehensibility of Israel’s actions. Their lack of sense surpasses even that of dumb donkeys and obstinate oxen, who at least recognize the authority of their master and their dependence on him for food.

Attacking Israel’s nature as fundamentally flawed, v. 4a piles up descriptions of their sinful character, gradually heightening the tension by moving from designations of Israel as a nation or people group (גוי, עם) to terms evoking a family context (זרע, בנים). In the context of an intimate family relationship, Israel’s sin takes on the character of personal betrayal. Verse 4b turns from the people’s nature to their actions, expressing how they have turned away from YHWH. By presenting this courtroom drama in the third person, the audience is invited to hear the accusation and evidence and take on the role of judge themselves, joining YHWH in condemnation of their own behavior.

These verses offer a rhetorically powerful case for the subsequent claim (in vv. 5–9) that Israel has no one to blame for their current pitiable situation but themselves. In light of vv. 2–4, the bruised body depicted in vv. 5–6 could perhaps be seen as that of a rebellious son receiving the punishment for his crime. Given the extent of the injuries, this is a troubling image. Yet Deut 21:18–21 metes out the death sentence in such a case, which suggests that from the

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15 Understood against the background of Deut 32, this would include guiding Israel through the wilderness and into their inheritance, feeding them, and nursing them.

16 Blenkinsopp, Isaiah 1–39, 182.

17 See Julia M. O’Brien, Challenging Prophetic Metaphor: Theology and Ideology in the Prophets (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008), 80, who assumes that these wounds are the result of parental discipline and suggestively remarks, “Isaiah does not criticize the father’s beatings but rather the son’s willfulness.”

18 The severity of the penalty is probably due to the idea that children who rebelled against their parents by completely overthrowing their authority threatened the survival of the family and potentially even the preservation of order in society (see Joseph Blenkinsopp, “The Family in First Temple Israel,” in Families in Ancient Israel [ed. Leo G. Perdue et al.; The Family, Religion, and Culture; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997], 70–72; Bellefontaine, “Deuteronomy 21:18–21,” 17; Jeffrey H. Tigay, Deuteronomy [The JPS Torah Commentary; Philadelphia: JPS, 1996], 196).
perspective of the text, defiant Israel has been shown mercy. With parental concern, YHWH pleads with the people to desist from their obstinate behavior: “Why should you still be struck down? [Why] do you persist in rebellion?,” v. 5). Their cultic observance is futile if they persist in disobeying YHWH’s commands to pursue justice and righteousness (vv. 10–17). YHWH promises forgiveness and blessing if they repent and obey (vv. 18–19) but further punishment if they continue to rebel (v. 20). Although the parent-child imagery is not picked up again at this point in the passage, these verses exhibit YHWH’s patience and unconditional love for his children as he seeks reconciliation despite their blatant rebellion against him (cf. the parable of the prodigal son).

The focus of the בָּנֵיָה metaphor is clearly on the responsibility of the people of Israel to honor their divine parent, in fitting response to his care and provision. The passage also invites reflection on YHWH’s love for his children and his grief at their rebellion, though these aspects are not explicit in the text. Human parents who have experienced (or can imagine) similar rejection by their own children cannot fail to resonate with the sorrow of the divine parent’s situation. Identifying with YHWH in his role as loving parent also heightens one’s perception of the hard-heartedness and callousness of the children, who show no concern for their parent but are determined to go their own way.
Daughter Zion

Daughter Zion also makes her debut in ch. 1 and, when the whole of the chapter is considered, displays significant family resemblances to YHWH’s בנות. In her initial introduction, however, she presents a more sympathetic and tragic figure. Following the text’s portrayal of Israel as a bruised body comes a more literal description of the devastation of its cities and land by foreigners (v. 7). Verses 8–9 highlight the extent of the destruction, narrowing the focus from the land as a whole to the city of Zion and bringing the subsection to a climax:

8  ונתהרה בת־ציון
     כסה ה XCTestCase
     מבסקה
     כעיר נווה
     ליל יוהו נבואת
9  If YHWH of hosts had not
    حسنינו נזרד בمعنى
     ככסד הלני
     לעמדה דמי

And Daughter Zion is left like a hut in a vineyard, like a watchman’s lodge in a cucumber field, like a city besieged.

Zion has fallen far from her exalted position as capital of the extensive and powerful Solomonic kingdom. Indeed, the continuance of the nation is hanging by a thin thread as Daughter Zion stands alone, defenseless and powerless, like an exposed and unprotected

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20 ככמות is not reproduced in the LXX, Tg., and Vg., though the sense of a remnant is retained.

21 The MT pointing reflects a qal pass. ptc. from נָצַר, “to watch, guard.” The LXX, however, has πολύνορκομενη, meaning “besieged” (reading צור), which makes better sense in the context (see Willem A. M. Beuken, “The Literary Emergence of Zion as a City in the First Opening of the Book of Isaiah [1,1–2,5],” in Gott und Mensch im Dialog: Festschrift für Otto Kaiser zum 80. Geburtstag [ed. Markus Witte; Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft 345; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2004], 1:460–61; so also the Tg., Syr., and Vg. and the English translations). Although translating the ptc. as “besieged,” Darr suggests that one could take the reading “well-guarded” as “tragically ironic” since the once imposing city is now protected by only a few inhabitants (Isaiah’s Vision, 136–37).
temporary hut in the middle of an agricultural plot. The fate of the besieged city in v. 8 is juxtaposed with the fate of the people in v. 9, the verses linked by their reliance on simile and use of יִתַּר ("to leave, be left"). YHWH has brought Israel to the very brink of annihilation, expressed quite vividly by recourse to the communal memory of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen 19). Yet he has also kept the nation from falling over the edge, preserving a small remnant of survivors and their capital city. These verses seek to persuade the people that their current course of behavior can only lead to their downfall, serving the rhetorical aim of the larger passage—to drive them to repentance. In this context, the daughter metaphor highlights Zion’s utter isolation, vulnerability, and defenselessness. It also implies YHWH’s complete authority over her as her parent, which he exercises both in punishing her (by giving her surrounding lands and towns to her enemies) and in protecting her from total destruction.

22 Dobbs-Allsopp identifies parallels to 1:8 in a few Mesopotamian laments and in Lam 2:6 (taking שָׁבַע as an alternate form of שָׁבַע), which compare destroyed temples with broken down garden huts. On the basis of these parallels, he argues that this verse portrays Jerusalem’s destruction, rather than her preservation (Weep, O Daughter of Zion: A Study of the City-Lament Genre in the Hebrew Bible [Rome: Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 1993], 69–70, 146; with less certainty, Darr, Isaiah’s Vision, 136–37). Yet the traditional understanding should be retained since (1) metaphors are often used in multiple ways; (2) none of these suggested parallels share enough linguistic correspondence with Isa 1:8 to argue strongly for dependence; (3) Isa 1:8 refers to the city, not the temple; and (4) nothing else in Isa 1 points clearly to the destruction of the city. See also Chris A. Franke, “‘Like a Mother I Have Comforted You’: The Function of Figurative Language in Isaiah 1:7–26 and 66:7–14,” in The Desert Will Bloom: Poetic Visions in Isaiah (ed. A. Joseph Everson and Hyun Chul Paul Kim; Ancient Israel and Its Literature 4; Atlanta: SBL, 2009), 39–40; Maier, Daughter Zion, 75–77; Hans-Jürgen Hermisson, “Die Frau Zion,” in Studies in the Book of Isaiah: Festschrift Willem A. M. Beuken (ed. J. Van Ruiten and M. Vervenne; BETL 132; Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1997), 26.

23 There may be an allusion both to YHWH’s hand in the destruction and to these two notorious cities already in v. 7, which describes Israel’s land as “overthrown (נָשָׁבַע) by strangers” using a word that appears elsewhere only with reference to YHWH overthrowing Sodom and Gomorrah (Deut 29:22; Isa 13:19; Jer 49:18; 50:40; Amos 4:11; Franke, “‘Like a Mother,’” 39).

24 Although the OT never explicitly names YHWH as the parent of בת-ציון, this is suggested by a few texts, in particular Isa 49:15 (in which YHWH’s remembrance of Zion is compared to that of a woman for her nursing child) and Jer 3:4, 19 (which states that Israel, personified as a woman, has called him “My father”). For others who hold this view, see Dearman, “Daughter Zion,” 154–55, 158–59; Maier, Daughter Zion, 72–74, 92; Elke Seifert, Tochter und Vater im Alten Testament: Eine ideologiekritische Untersuchung zur Verfügungsgewalt von Vätern über ihre Töchter (Neukirchener Theologische Dissertationen und Habilitationen 9; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1997), 246–47; Elaine R. Follis, “The Holy City as Daughter,” in Directions in Biblical Hebrew Poetry (ed. Elaine R. Follis; JSOTSup 40; Sheffield: JSOT, 1987), 182; Jacqueline E. Lapsley, “‘Look! The
Although these verses do not highlight the city’s culpability, focusing instead on the sins of its people,26 a survey of Daughter Zion’s appearances elsewhere in the OT suggests that city and people cannot be easily separated. Moreover, v. 21, the only other occurrence of the city’s personification in the chapter, does describe the city’s sin:

27 אמאמה להיהלחמהקרביהנאממה
מלאתמשפעכךלוןבה
והמהמרצחים
How the faithful city has become a harlot.
Full of justice, righteousness dwelt in her, but now, murderers.

Since there is no hint of the marriage metaphor here (or elsewhere in Isa 1–39, for that matter), the city’s harlotry is best understood within the context of the daughter metaphor.28 The verse evokes the image of Jerusalem not as YHWH’s adulterous wife, but as a wayward daughter whose unrestrained sexuality brings shame upon her divine parent.29

This is supported by the way the image is used, which departs radically from accusations of harlotry linked to the marriage metaphor. Here there is no reference to the partners of the city’s illicit sexual unions, elsewhere identified as idols or other nations. Instead, her harlotry is

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25 Williamson suggests that the metaphorical portrayal of Zion’s “solitariness” aims to elicit the reader’s compassion (Isaiah 1–5, 70); however, at least with regard to the implied audience, the aim seems rather to lead them to recognize their dependence on YHWH. Maier points out that a young woman left by herself in a field would be vulnerable to violence or sexual assault, thus contending that this portrait of Zion conveys her need for paternal protection (Daughter Zion, 76).

26 See Darr, Isaiah’s Vision, 136.

27 The LXX adds “Zion” here to clarify the referent, though it is clear from vv. 8 and 27 (see Marc Wischnowsky, Tochter Zion: Aufnahme und Überwindung der Stadtklage in den Prophetenschriften des Alten Testaments [WMANT 89; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 2001], 147).

28 Beuken differentiates between “the daughter of Zion” in v. 8, which he sees as a representative of the people, and קריה in this verse, which he takes as a reference to the city itself (“Literary Emergence,” 1:465). Yet the image of Daughter Zion is used flexibly in the OT to denote both the city and its population.

29 Dearman calls for careful differentiation of these images of personified Zion, with particular reference to Lamentations, noting that “[a]n unmarried daughter may be promiscuous and a harlot, offending the honor of the household, but she is not an adulteress” (“Daughter Zion,” 156–57).
described as a failure to maintain justice and righteousness. Murderers run free in the city, and thievery and bribery rule the day among her rulers, leading to the neglect of the oppressed (v. 23). The introductory particle איכה in v. 21 suggests the genre of lament (see Lam 1:1; 2:1; 4:1, 2), but this is not followed by the expected description of the city’s destruction. Instead, the passage laments the city’s moral decline, an appropriate response for a parent when faced with a daughter’s shame. The accusations of harlotry and injustice form the basis for YHWH’s declaration of a purifying judgment (vv. 24–26), in which Zion and her repentant citizens will be “redeemed” but “those who rebel” will be destroyed (vv. 27–28).

The city’s harlotry strikingly depicts her defiance against the authority of her divine parent. As Israelite parents would instruct their daughters in chastity, so YHWH instructs Jerusalem in justice and righteousness. Yet Jerusalem, in willful independence is determined to go her own way, much like the children in vv. 2–4. Despite her aberrant behavior, which in Israelite society would merit the death penalty, YHWH determines not to utterly destroy or reject

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30 See Hermisson, “Die Frau Zion,” 22; Wischnowsky, Tochter Zion, 149; also Raymond C. Ortlund Jr., Whoredom: God’s Unfaithful Wife in Biblical Theology (New Studies in Biblical Theology; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 79, who characterizes the harlotry here as “moral and social,” arguing that the city’s sins “spring ultimately from deeply personal defection from Yahweh.” Although the context of Ortlund’s book suggests that he means marital defection, his comment would also be appropriate to a filial relationship.

Darr claims that the reference to the city’s lack of justice does not describe her harlotrous behavior but merely laments her current situation, placing the blame for her impurity on her leaders. Then, claiming that the passage offers no elaboration of the harlotry image, she reads it against the background of its traditional use elsewhere in connection with the marriage metaphor. In particular, she links it with the adultery text in 57:6–13, which she sees as graphically depicting the same post-exilic situation as that reflected in Isa 1:21–28 (Isaiah’s Vision, 138–40, 188; idem, “Alas, She Has Become a Harlot,’ but Who’s to Blame?: Unfaithful-Female Imagery in Isaiah’s Vision,” in Passion, Vitality, and Foment [Harrisburg, Pa.: Trinity, 2001], 61–63, 72–73). Darr seems to assume that 1:21–28 must not provide any explanation of the city’s harlotry because it does not correspond to how the harlotry image is employed elsewhere. If, however, the daughter metaphor provides the framework for understanding the harlotry in 1:21, rather than the marriage metaphor, then the differences in its depiction make sense. As Darr observes, the OT occasionally describes foreign cities as harlots (e.g., Tyre: Isa 23:15–18; Nineveh: Nah 3:4) even though the marriage metaphor is not applied to them. Perhaps this passage should be seen as parallel to these occurrences.

her. Perhaps because she is his cherished daughter, he vows instead to cleanse her from her harlotrous impurities and restore her to her former place of honor and prominence.

The Final Act: Isaiah 65–66

As Isa 1 opens with “rebellious” (פשׁע) children who do not recognize their divine parent (1:2–3), the book’s final rhetorical unit (chs. 65–66) begins with a “stubborn (סרד; cf. 1:23) people” who ignore YHWH’s call and go their own way (65:2). Here, however, the people are not called YHWH’s בנים but rather hisעבדים (65:8, 9, 13 [3x], 14, 15; 66:14), a designation that is absent from the first half of the book. These chapters also display a further development over ch. 1.
The first chapter of the book addresses the people of Israel as a whole as rebellious children, leading to a call for all Israel to repent. If they are “willing and obedient,” they will “eat the good of the land” (v. 19). But if they “refuse and rebel (מרה),” they will instead “be eaten by the sword” (v. 20). The end of that chapter, however, witnesses to a future division in the community between the righteous and the unrighteous: “Zion will be redeemed in justice and her repentant ones in righteousness. But rebels (פשׁע) and sinners [will be] broken together, and those who forsake (עזב) YHWH will come to an end” (vv. 27–28). Chapters 65–66 seem to assume that the


33 The singular term “servant” is first applied to Israel in Isa 41:8, and the plural first appears in 54:17, denoting the children promised to Zion.
time for repentance is past by drawing a clear line of demarcation between YHWH’s servants and those who persist in rebellion (פשׁע, 66:24), continuing to forsake YHWH (עזב, 65:11).\textsuperscript{34}

This deep divide within the community, with the faithful remnant rejected and hated by some among their own people (66:5), informs the rhetorical situation of the passage. Clearly the fires of exile have not completely purged the people of their pre-exilic predilection toward sin. A fuller glimpse into the rhetorical situation is provided by the preceding lament in 63:7–64:11 [Eng. 12]. This passage mourns the devastation of Zion and the temple and calls for YHWH to act on behalf of his people, bringing their punishment to an end. Regardless of the book’s development, in its final form chs. 65–66 function as YHWH’s response to the lamenters’ pleas.\textsuperscript{35}

The Remnant as YHWH’s Servants in Isaiah 65

In contrast to the lamenters’ complaint that YHWH has hidden his face from them (64:7), YHWH declares that he was ready all along to embrace his people—only they were not seeking him (65:1–2a). He also proclaims that the sins of both the present generation and their ancestors have reaped their due reward (65:2–7) but promises to preserve a faithful remnant in the midst of his judgment (v. 8–10). Addressing the unregenerate rebels, YHWH then offers an extended

\textsuperscript{34} See Carr, “Reading Isaiah,” 204, 212; contra Richard Nysse, “Rebels from Beginning to End,” WW 19 (1999): 170, who suggests that “the servants and ‘not-servants’ have much in common, so much that they may be one and the same.”

contrast between their fate and that awaiting the righteous few, whom he describes as his

“servants” (vv. 11–15): 36

Thus says YHWH,

“As when new wine is found in the cluster,

and [someone] says, ‘Do not destroy it,

for there is blessing in it,’

so I will do for the sake of my servants
to not destroy them all.

And I will bring forth from Jacob offspring

and from Judah possessors of my mountains.

And my chosen ones will possess it,

and my servants will dwell there.

And Sharon will be as a pasture for flocks,

and the Valley of Achor

as a resting place for cattle

for my people who seek me.

But you who forsake YHWH,

who forget my holy mountain,

who set a table for Fortune

and who fill a mixing vessel for Destiny,

I will consign you to the sword,

and all of you will bow down to the slaughter

because I called and you did not answer;

I spoke and you did not listen.

And you did evil in my eyes,


37 Since the fem. sg. suffix does not match the supposed masc. pl. antecedent, “my mountains,” BHS suggests emending to יריחו (see also Dim, Eschatological Implications, 82). The LXX omits the pronoun, though it has “my holy mountain” (cf. v. 11) in place of “my mountains,” which is a rare phrase (though see Isa 14:25; 49:11). 1QIsa3 has a masc. sg. suffix (יריחו, Yirush; יריחו; יריחו; Yirush), presumably reading the preceding יריחו as a sg. form (see Jan L. Koole, Isaiah Chapters 56–66 [vol. 3 of Isaiah III; trans. Anthony P. Runia; Historical Commentary on the Old Testament; Leuven: Peeters, 2001], 432). The Tg. and Vg. have a fem. sg. object, following the MT, which should be preserved and may, in light of the reference to YHWH’s “holy mountain” in v. 11, refer to Jerusalem (see 66:20). Alternatively, the assumed but unstated antecedent could be ארץ (“land”; so Blenkinsopp, Isaiah 56–66, 273–74).
Therefore, thus says the Lord YHWH, “See, my servants will eat, but you will be hungry. See, my servants will drink, but you will be thirsty. See, my servants will rejoice, but you will be put to shame. See, my servants will shout with joy from gladness of heart, but you will cry out from anguish of heart and wail from brokenness of spirit. And you will leave your name as a curse to my chosen ones, and the Lord YHWH will put you to death. But his servants he will call by another name so that the one who blesses himself in the land will bless himself by the God of truth, and the one who swears in the land will swear by the God of truth because the former troubles are forgotten and (because they) are hidden from my eyes.

Comparing his servants to new wine found in a rejected vine, which saves the vine from complete destruction (v. 8), YHWH promises that the lineage of Jacob will continue, producing offspring who will (once again) be chosen by him and will inherit the land (v. 9). As 1:19–20 promised, these chosen ones will “eat the good of the land” (see v. 13a) while their obstinate compatriots face death by sword (see v. 12a). Moreover, YHWH’s servants will be filled with joy and will receive a new name, one that is unsullied by the sinfulness of the rebels (vv. 13b–15) and will become a basis for blessing (v. 16). For unlike the rebels, these servants have not

38 So the ESV and NKJV; also Koole, Isaiah 56–66, 444. On this use of אֲשֶׁר, see further IBHS 38.3b; GKC §166b.

39 Or “the God whose name is Amen” (so Blenkinsopp, Isaiah 56–66, 280).

40 In Gen 22:18 (cf. 26:4), YHWH promised that the nations would “bless themselves” (also using the hitpael of בָּרֶךְ) through Abraham’s offspring. Now this blessing will come only through those of Abraham’s offspring who prove themselves to be faithful servants and have thus been given a new name (see John Oswalt, The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 40–66 [NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998], 651). In the context, this name “implies
forsaken YHWH (v. 11a; cf. 1:4) or ignored his call (vv. 11a, 12b) but have actively and intentionally sought him (v. 10b). Moreover, they have refrained from going their own way and choosing to do what is evil and detestable in the sight of their God (v. 12c), such as engaging in idolatrous pagan rituals (v. 11b). Elsewhere, YHWH’s servants are described as those who are “humble and broken in spirit” and tremble at YHWH’s word (66:2; cf. v. 5) and who love and mourn over Jerusalem (66:10; cf. 65:11a).

Although the passage uses various designations to refer to the remnant, the frequent repetition of the term “servants”—particularly in vv. 8–15 where it occurs seven times in eight verses—testifies to its importance. In the carefully balanced paired lines in vv. 13–14 where the bulk of the references are concentrated, the formula הַעֲבֵדִ֥י אַ֖תֶּם . . . ואֹֽהֵ֗מ (“See, my servants . . . but you . . .”) forcefully impresses on the addressees the fundamental difference between themselves and those who will receive God’s rewards—the latter recognize YHWH as their lord and master and live in subservience to him. Like any good household servant, the remnant attends to YHWH’s voice and follows his instructions, doing what pleases their master. Thus the repeated use of the servant metaphor underscores a dominant theme in the passage—that the distinguishing characteristic of the remnant is obedience to YHWH.⁴¹

Although ch. 1 uses the metaphor of the people as YHWH’s children to communicate their responsibility to live under his authority, the servant metaphor heightens this point. Unlike a parent and child, a master and servant are not tied together by intimate bonds of blood but by an agreement of faithful work on the part of the servant and economic relief or protection on the part of the master. The servant metaphor therefore narrows the scope of the relationship between

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⁴¹ See also Dim, Eschatological Implications, 90; Oswalt, Isaiah 40–66, 650.
YHWH and the remnant and gives the people no ground for relying on YHWH’s help and support aside from their loyal service to him. As the passage makes clear, however, for those who have chosen to become his servants, YHWH proves to be a magnanimous master, providing abundant support and blessing. Indeed, his servants will inherit a new heavens and new earth devoid of trouble and suffering (65:16–25).

A Complex Confluence of Relational Metaphors in Isaiah 66: The Remnant as Both Children and Servants; Zion and YHWH as Mothers

While in ch. 65 the root metaphor of YHWH’s house finds expression only in the repeated references to his servants, ch. 66 combines several household metaphors in its attempt to describe the astonishing and glorious future that YHWH is bringing about for his chosen people. Personified Zion reappears, but now she is portrayed not as a daughter but as mother of her redeemed citizens (vv. 7–12), who are also called YHWH’s servants (v. 14). In a surprising twist, the passage applies maternal imagery not only to Zion but also to YHWH (v. 13), painting a seemingly conflicting family portrait.

The chapter begins by emphasizing the importance of inward attitudes (v. 2b) over sacrificial worship (v. 3a), echoing the claim of Isa 1 that cultic activity is not efficacious for those who rebel against YHWH (1:10–15). This is followed by a scathing rebuke of the wicked (vv. 3–4; cf. 65:1–7) and a vow to those who fear YHWH that their enemies will receive their recompense (vv. 5–6; cf. 65:6–7). As in ch. 65, this initial section of judgment is followed by a word of salvation for the righteous remnant (vv. 7–14). Yet whereas 65:8–16 addresses the rebels, contrasting their fate with the marvelous promises given to YHWH’s servants, here the promises of comfort and renewal are addressed directly to Zion and her children. The rebels have almost completely disappeared from the scene (but see v. 14d), and the spotlight illuminates the
astonishing future that God is bringing about for Zion, fulfilling his promise to redeem and restore her in 1:25–27:

7 “Before she was in labor, she bore [a child].
8 Before labor pains came upon her, she gave birth to a boy.
9 Who has ever heard such a thing?
10 Who has ever seen such things?
11 As soon as she was in labor, Zion bore her children.
12 Will I bring to birth and not deliver,” says YHWH?
13 “Will I, who bring to delivery, shut [the womb],” says your God?44
14 Rejoice with Jerusalem,
15 and be glad over her, all you who love her.
16 Rejoice with her in joy,
17 all you who mourn over her,
18 that you may nurse and be satisfied from her comforting breast,
19 that you may drink deeply and take delight from her glorious bosom.”
20 For thus says YHWH,
21 “See, I am extending to her peace as a river,
22 and as an overflowing stream, the glory of the nations,
23 and you will nurse.
24 On the hip you will be carried,
25 and on the knees you will be dandled.
26 As a man whose mother comforts him,
27 so I will comfort you,
28 and by Jerusalem45 you will be comforted.

42 The MT contains a masc. verbal form, but the subject is clearly the fem. יולדת. See GKC §121a on the use of masc. verbs in impersonal passive constructions (John D. W. Watts, Isaiah 34–66 [WBC 25; Waco, Tex.: Word, 1987], 360). 1QIsa® has a fem. form, perhaps a harmonization.

43 This word appears elsewhere only in Ps 50:11 and 80:14 indicating some kind of animal. The versions apparently did not understand the word and offer little help, but Arabic and Akk. cognates suggest the meaning “nipple” (Blenkinsopp, Isaiah 56–66, 303; Oswalt, Isaiah 40–66, 672n36).

44 The versions are periphrastic on this verse, but they share an emphasis on YHWH’s power.

45 Most translations have “in Jerusalem” (NASB, ESV, NLT, NRSV, JPS), though the NIV translates “over Jerusalem” and Watts, “with Jerusalem” (Isaiah 34–66, 359). See below for further comment.
And you will see, and your heart will rejoice, and your bones will flourish like the grass. And the hand of YHWH will be known to his servants, but he will be indignant with his enemies.”

Initially, the woman described as giving birth to a male child (זכר) is unnamed (v. 7). Consonant with the eschatological dimensions of the larger passage, this birth is far from ordinary, occurring without labor pains in a miraculous reversal of the curse on Eve.47 The first pair of rhetorical questions in v. 8 conveys astonishment at this delivery free from pain and struggle, but the second pair alerts the reader to another point of amazement—it is not the birth of a single child or even of twins or triplets but of a whole nation at once. This invites the reader to reconsider זכר in v. 7, now understanding it as a collective representation of a people.

Finally, at the end of v. 8, the pregnant woman is identified as Zion,48 who is depicted as giving birth to בנים for the first time in Isaiah.49 This portrait of Zion giving birth to a multitude provides a striking contrast with the lonely and isolated image of Daughter Zion in 1:8. The single second person suffix denoting YHWH as “your God” in v. 9 emphasizes Zion’s

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46 Koole translates: “And the hand of Yahweh with his servants will be known,” i.e., by the nations (Isaiah 56–66, 502–3). The versions, however, support translating את as “to” (see also Oswalt, Isaiah 40–66, 673). Moreover, the parallel with the subsequent line suggests that it is the servants who will know YHWH’s power; the lines may then be taken together to present the two groups’ contrasting experiences of God.


48 Chris A. Franke, “‘Like a Mother I have Comforted You’: The Function of Figurative Language in Isaiah 1:7–26 and 66:7–14,” in The Desert Will Bloom: Poetic Visions in Isaiah (ed. A. Joseph Everson and Hyun Chul Paul Kim; Ancient Israel and Its Literature 4; Atlanta: SBL, 2009), 44.

49 Bereaved and barren Zion is promised a multitude of children in 49:17–21 and 54:1–3, but the latter provides no hint as to her children’s origin. In 49:21 she wonders where her children have come from (v. 21), though vv. 22–23 suggest that they have been brought back from exile.
relationship with the God who is able both to bring babies to the point of birth and to safely deliver them, in an effort to assuage her doubts about his claims.

With this assurance of a successful childbirth, the prophet turns to address a masculine plural audience, presumably those who fear YHWH (see v. 5). Here they are identified as the children Zion has borne and portrayed as nursing infants (v. 11). These addressees are further described as “those who love” and “mourn over” Zion (v. 10) and are called to rejoice with Zion in order that they may nurse at her breast to satiation, delighting in her abundant provision (v. 11). Whereas in 49:23 foreign queens functioned as nursemaids to Zion’s children, now she is able to nurse them herself, providing both nourishment and the comfort of the maternal bond. No longer the defenseless and vulnerable city of ch. 1 offering no support to the unrighteous citizens who look to her for security, now Zion is a source of protection and sustenance for the redeemed.50 Ultimately, however, YHWH is the source of Zion’s plentiful stores of milk, which symbolize “peace” and the “glory [i.e., wealth and splendor] of the nations.” These flow like a river to Zion51 and through her to her nursing infants, as the repetition of the verb “and you will suck” makes clear.52 Earlier passages portray Zion’s children being carried by foreigners on their journey back to their mother (49:22; 60:4), but now they will be carried by their mother and dandled on her knees.53

50 Carr, “Reading Isaiah,” 216.
51 Darr sees here an echo of the river that watered and flowed from the Garden of Eden (Gen 2:10; Isaiah’s Vision, 222).
52 Oswalt, Isaiah 40–66, 678.
53 Given the passive verbs, Häusl argues that the one who carries and dandles the children could be either Zion or YHWH (“Gott als Vater und Mutter und die Sohnschaft des Volkes in der Prophetie: Rezeption mythischer Vorstellungen,” in Mythisches in biblischer Bildsprache: Gestalt und Verwandlung in Prophectie und Psalmen [ed. Hubert Irsigler; QD 209; Freiburg: Herder, 2004], 279). Yet since YHWH does not appear in a motherly role until the following verse, Zion is the more likely candidate.
The metaphor of Zion as a mother who bears and cares for a multitude of children highlights the abundance of honor, vitality, and well-being that YHWH has in store for the city’s future. By portraying Zion’s righteous citizens as her children, and more specifically as her satisfied and contented nursing babies, the text emphasizes their dependence on their city-mother, who provides for all their needs. They will share in Zion’s abundant life and do not need to worry about their own support and provision. Moreover, by depicting the people as innocent and helpless infants, the aspect of filial responsibility—featured so prominently in the depiction of YHWH’s rebellious children in Isa 1—completely fades from view.

Nowhere does the father of Zion’s children appear in the passage. YHWH functions, first and foremost, as a midwife, but v. 13 also likens the comfort he offers his people to that of a mother. This produces some tension with Zion’s role as the people’s mother, but v. 12 may provide an interpretive key. It indicates that YHWH’s maternal care is mediated through Zion’s motherhood as he abundantly supplies her with the means to care for her children. He will provide her with an overflowing river of peace from which the children may drink (v. 12). This suggests that in the clause תנחמו ובירושלׁם in v. 13, the ב should be read instrumentally—when YHWH comforts the people, they will be comforted “by Jerusalem.” The people’s resulting

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54 Sawyer, “Daughter of Zion,” 98; Maier, Daughter Zion, 202.

55 The threefold repetition of נחמתי in v. 13 forms an inclusio with the opening call of Isa 40–66: נחמויי ו湎תיי ופחמתיי (“Comfort, comfort, my people,” 40:1; see Franke, “Like a Mother,” 46).

56 Schmitt views the metaphor of Zion as mother as the source for this reflection on YHWH’s maternal characteristics (“The Motherhood of God and Zion as Mother,” RB 92 [1985]: 569). Maier agrees, suggesting that for a “doubting and desperate audience . . . the empathetic and loving Mother Zion offers a role model for YHWH because it reinforces the idea of a compassionate and forgiving deity” (Daughter Zion, 203).

57 See Maier, Daughter Zion, 203–4, who understands מ here to have a double meaning of both “in” and “by.”
well-being is emphasized by an extraordinary concentration of terms for rejoicing and flourishing (see vv. 10–14).  

Maternal imagery is only rarely applied to YHWH in the OT, though it has been explored by several studies over the last few decades. Roland Frye contends that texts like this intentionally use similes (which merely compare) rather than metaphors (which identify) in order to create distance between YHWH and the feminine image of a mother. While I agree that this verse offers more of a comparison than an identification, the reason is not because it contains a simile instead of a metaphor. The simile in this verse is best characterized as an *illustrative* (rather than a *modeling*) simile since it offers a single point of comparison—the comfort YHWH gives his people is compared to that of a mother for her son. Thus it merely describes a particular facet of YHWH’s demeanor toward his children, rather than encouraging the reader to

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61 The terms *illustrative* and *modeling simile* are taken from Janet Martin Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 59–60, although she distinguishes between them on the basis of our “epistemic distance” from the tenor (or subject) of the metaphor—in this case, YHWH. If the tenor “is beyond our full grasp,” she contends, we will view the vehicle (the object with which the tenor is compared) as a model for conceptualizing the tenor. While I appreciate Soskice’s classification, I think a more helpful criterion for distinguishing between illustrative and modeling similes is the degree to which the point(s) of comparison are explicitly stated. A simile that offers a single explicit point of comparison does not invite further creative reflection on the part of the hearer.
envision YHWH on the model of a human mother. Nevertheless, the simile is suggestive, highlighting the intimacy and depth of concern from which YHWH’s comfort springs and inviting the faithful remnant to receive from him the tender consolation of a mother for her children in sharp contrast to the parental indictment of Isa 1.62

The root metaphor of YHWH’s house makes its final appearance in the book in v. 14, which once again contrasts YHWH’s servants, here identified with Zion’s children (cf. 54:17),63 with the rebels, now called YHWH’s “enemies” (cf. v. 6). The stark contrast between “servants” and “enemies” leaves no room for a middle ground, suggesting that those who do not submit to YHWH as their master thereby render themselves his foes. They will suffer his fierce indignation, while his servants will experience the salvific power of his hand. As in 65:13–14, here YHWH’s servants are also filled with rejoicing. Indeed, their prospering reaches all the way down to their bones, which “flourish like the grass.”64

An Ambiguous Response to the Lament:
Redefining the Servants and Neglecting the Children?

Examining how Isa 65–66 employs these relational metaphors helps us to see that these chapters provide a somewhat ambiguous response to the lamenters’ pleas and particularly to their claim upon YHWH as their father (Isa 63:8, 16; 64:7 [Eng. 8]). The lamenters complain that YHWH is withholding from them “the agitation of [his] inner parts” and his “compassion” (רחמים 63:15), and here YHWH responds positively with a comfort (נחם) that entails maternal affection and


64 Blenkinsopp observes that “in liturgical hymns . . . emotions deeply internalized (e.g., of joy or terror) are felt in the bones,” e.g., Ps 32:3; 51:10 [Eng. 8] (Isaiah 56–66, 307).
concern (66:13). Moreover, the lamenters mourn that “Zion is a desert” (64:9 [10]), and now, though picturing Zion as a woman rather than a place, YHWH promises fertility through the miraculous birth of children without labor pains (66:7–9).

Yet the lamenters also call out to YHWH to “return for the sake of your servants (למען עבדיך)” so that he will no longer allow (or cause?) them to wander from his ways (63:17). Echoing their words, YHWH promises, “so I will do for the sake of my servants (למען עבידי)” (65:8). But while the lamenters identify YHWH’s servants with Israel as a whole (note that “the tribes of your inheritance” stands in apposition to “your servants” in 63:17), YHWH applies that label only to a faithful remnant.65 What he plans to “do for the sake of [his] servants” is not to bring about a complete reconciliation with his errant people but merely to preserve a few through the coming judgment. Moreover, the lamenters ask YHWH to “make known your name to your adversaries (צריך)” (64:1 [2]), that is, to execute judgment on the foreigners who “trampled your sanctuary” (63:18). On the one hand, YHWH does promise to “repay” (66:6) and “show indignation against his enemies (איביו)” (66:14). He also announces that some from the remnant of Israel will “declare [his] glory [often used as a parallel to ‘name’] among the nations” (66:19). Yet on the other hand, here the “enemies” YHWH focuses on are not their foreign oppressors but some from among their own people—that is, they are some of the very people described as “servants” by the lamenters.66 These Israelite foes have dishonored YHWH’s “holy mountain”

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65 Curt Lindhagen, The Servant Motif in the Old Testament: A Preliminary Study to the Ebed-Yahweh Problem in Deutero-Isaiah (Uppsala: Lundequistaska Bokhandeln, 1950), 249; Schramm, The Opponents of Third Isaiah, 158; Smith, Rhetoric and Redaction, 142; Tiemeyer, “Two Prophets,” 198. Based on the use of למען in the phrase “for the sake of your servants,” Beuken contends that the lamenters’ plea to YHWH indicates not that they “consider themselves as his faithful servants” but that they desire for him to return in order to make them faithful servants (Beuken, “Main Theme,” 75, 86n16). This, however, cannot be substantiated on the use of למען alone. In the context, the phrase could simply mean “for the well-being of your servants,” i.e., to save them from their foreign oppressors.

66 See also Carr, “Reading Isaiah,” 212–13.
(65:11) just like the foreign armies who destroyed the temple. Moreover, when the remnant of Israel proclaims YHWH’s glory among the nations, it will result not in the foreigners’ judgment but in their inclusion in the people of God. Indeed, some of them will even be chosen as priests and Levites (66:20–21).

Furthermore, although YHWH does not dispute the lamenters’ identification of him as their father, neither does he affirm it, instead merely alluding to a maternal disposition toward them. In so doing, he even seems to go out of his way to avoid calling the people his בנים rather than בֵּית אֱלִישָׁבָא in the first clause of the simile and emphasizing איש by placing it at the beginning in a somewhat awkward construction that does not parallel the second clause:

As a man whose mother comforts him, so I will comfort you.

This simile is also immediately followed by the final depiction of the righteous remnant as YHWH’s servants (v. 14b), perhaps to reaffirm that this metaphor should now form the primary basis for the people’s self-understanding. Indeed, the third person reference to YHWH’s servants is conspicuous after the second person plural address of vv. 10–14a and may reflect an intentional effort to clarify the core identity of the addressees. The book ends with an important verbal link to its beginning: the “rebellious” (פשע) children of 1:2 (cf. 1:28)—or rather those

67 Koole, Isaiah 56–66, 435.

68 See Baumgart, “Wenn JHWH Kinder erzieht,” 42; Carr, “Reading Isaiah,” 213.

69 Noting the strangeness of this use of איש to designate apparently a young boy, Darr suggests that it echoes the story of Eve who declares in Gen 4:1, “I have gotten a man with [the help of] the Lord” (Isaiah’s Vision, 222–23). Blocher sees איש as indicating that even as adults, the men of Israel need the comfort of a mother extended by YHWH (Henri Blocher, “Glorious Zion, Our Mother: Readings in Isaiah [Conspectus, or Abridged],” EuroJTh 11 [2002]: 11; see also Oswalt, Isaiah 40–66, 678). The LXX follows the MT, translating איש with τίνα (“someone”).

70 Such switches in person are not infrequent in Isaiah’s oracles, however (cf. the change from third person to second person reference to Zion in vv. 8–9), and thus are not necessarily meaningful.
who persist in rejecting YHWH—finally reap their reward of destruction in 66:24. Only the faithful servants remain, “and they will go out and see the dead bodies of the men who rebelled (פשע) against [YHWH],” burning with a fire that “will not be quenched (כבה)” (cf. 1:31).  

Conclusion

Metaphors taken from the realm of household relationships are central to Isaiah’s portrayal of Israel’s identity as the people of YHWH. Analyzing how these metaphors are used in the framing chapters of the book provides insight into how the characters of both people and city develop from the beginning of the book to its end. In the opening act of Isaiah’s drama, Zion takes the stage as a vulnerable, defenseless daughter (1:8), who is abandoned due to her shameful engagement in harlotry (1:21). By the closing act, however, she has been transformed into a radiant and caring mother, miraculously giving birth to her children before the onset of labor pains (66:7–12). Similarly, the people are first presented as YHWH’s rebellious children, who tragically fail to recognize the authority of their divine parent, but they are eventually rebirthed by Mother Zion to become contented babes nursing at her breast (66:11–12) and receiving YHWH’s maternal comfort (66:13). Yet not all of YHWH’s rebellious children experience this dramatic change—only those who willingly take on the role of servant in YHWH’s household (66:14; cf. 65:8–9, 13–15) experience the satisfaction and delight of Zion’s maternal care and provision.

While the lamenters in 63:7–64:11 [Eng. 12] ground their request for YHWH to act on their behalf in their dual identity as his children (63:8, 16; 64:7 [Eng. 8]) and servants (63:17), YHWH chooses in his response to take up only the latter designation. Indeed, neither YHWH

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nor the prophet ever explicitly call the people YHWH’s children after 45:11, where they are chastised for questioning their divine parent about what kind of offspring he has produced. Instead, the latter chapters of the book identify the people as the children of Zion (beginning in ch. 49). Since YHWH was Zion’s husband before he divorced her and sold off her children (50:1), the children of Zion presumably belong to him as well. Yet there seems to be a distancing of the children from YHWH after ch. 45, perhaps because, as in Deut 32:5, they are no longer his children due to their sin. Although ch. 54 envisions a restoration of the family relationships, it focuses on the marital reconciliation between YHWH and Zion and the return of Zion’s children. Nowhere in the chapter does YHWH explicitly acknowledge Zion’s children as his own.

Chapter 54 also marks the first appearance of the plural “servants” (עבדים), YHWH’s preferred designation for the faithful remnant in chs. 65–66 (65:8, 9, 13 [3x], 14, 15; 66:14). The current shape of the book may suggest that servants is a better metaphor than children to express how the returned exiles should relate to their divine redeemer. Too strong a reliance on the privileges of their filial relationship to YHWH could lead to complacency and a lack of devotion, ultimately incurring YHWH’s judgment, as the exile made painfully clear. Although the last chapters of the book of Isaiah do not repudiate the metaphor of the parent-child relationship between YHWH and Israel, they redirect the focus to a metaphor that more clearly depicts the redeemed remnant’s responsibility to honor and follow after YHWH.
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