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The naked truth or prophecy as folly? A performative interpretation of Isaiah 20

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How does one make sense of a naked prophet who walked the streets of Jerusalem for no less than three years? This contribution interpreted the ambulatory naked prophet in Isaiah 20 as a sign-act by means of symbolic interactionism and performative interpretation according to which symbolic or sign-acts are multivalent entities. Isaiah 20 was interpreted as an embodied, multivalent text that invited ongoing appropriation among subsequent audiences while exploring the potential meaning(s) of the initial act within the parameters of text and context. It is presupposed that human beings reinterpret symbolic acts in different subsequent contexts and that a symbolic act should never be reduced to one single (original!) meaning – this reinterpretation process is illustrated by the Septuagint translation of Isaiah 20. Furthermore, the question will be posed how one could interpret and appropriate a disruptive and 'foolish' prophetic and symbolic act of public exposure – Isaiah as an 'agent provocateur'?

Contribution: The performative critique of Isaiah 20 drew attention to the neglected multivalent character of the initial sign-act that enabled ongoing appropriations ('*Fortschreibung*') in new contexts of competing power relations. At first the sign-act was relevant for its pre-exilic audience, then for the post-exilic and even later for a Hellenistic audience by means of the Septuagint version. It also illustrated that text interpretation can be a catalyst that unsettles and disrupts power (within and beyond academic and believing communities), even when it is considered folly.

Keywords: Isaiah 20; prophecy; sign-acts; performative criticism; symbolic interactionism; *Fortschreibung*.

Introduction[1]

Most biblical scholars agree that the prophecy in Isaiah 20 entails a barefoot and naked or scantily clad prophet performing a symbolic or sign-act for almost three years as a warning to the impending fate of Egypt and Cush (Ethiopia or Nubia) and potentially the Southern Kingdom of Judah at the hands of the Assyrians.[2]

This contribution will interpret the prophecy in Isaiah 20 by means of symbolic interactionism and performative interpretation, according to which symbolic or sign-acts are multivalent entities – embodied texts that invite ongoing appropriation among subsequent audiences while exploring the potential meaning(s) of the initial act within the parameters of text and context (Campbell & Cilliers 2012). It is presupposed that human beings reinterpret sign-acts in different subsequent contexts and that a sign-act should never be reduced to one single (original!) meaning – this reinterpretation process is illustrated by the Septuagint translation of Isaiah 20. Furthermore, the question will be posed how one could interpret and appropriate a disruptive and 'foolish' prophetic and symbolic act of public exposure.

Combining performance criticism with symbolic interactionism

'Biblical performance criticism' can be described as 'the study of biblical writings as witness to oral performances … in the context of predominantly oral cultures of the ancient world' by

1.The article is dedicated to Prof. Johan Cilliers (emeritus professor at Stellenbosch University and recently rated by the NRF as an A1 researcher). He stimulated students over many years to engage with a paradoxical text like the Bible in a manner that both challenges and enables the believing community to come to a deeper understanding of an often-incongruous message. Although such an approach almost inevitably leads to episodes of supposed foolishness, he developed a creative and liminal space for unsettling interpretation and transformative preaching – building blocks for a homiletic that nurtures a *semper reformanda* theological ethos!

2.Since the late 19th century, Isaiah commentators from different exegetical traditions agreed that the sign-act performed by Isaiah warned against the futile resistance to the encroaching Assyrian empire: Duhm ([1892]1968), Kaiser (1974), Wildberger (1978), Clements (1980), Childs (2001), Blenkinsopp (2008), Roberts (2015).

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shifting the focus of interpretation 'from what a written text *means* to the *impact* of a performance of that text's content on an audience' (Rhoads 2017:281).

Mathews (2020) is one of the few scholars who have attempted to make use of performance criticism in the interpretation of prophetic texts in the Old Testament, and she presumes from the start that prophetic literature is inherently performative because the prophets often use their bodies and props to act out divine communication.[3] The audiences of Israelite prophets were predominantly oral or aural, and the performed texts were intended to be heard, seen and experienced – not as written texts read in private, but also as symbolic acts performed in public. In most cases, the performances were not for mere amusement but intended to change the mind-set of the audience, to 'transform the world' (Mathews 2020:2). There is an important presupposition of Mathews that requires further critical reflection: performance criticism allows 'focus on the *potential* and not the *intended* theatre or performance of biblical texts' by attending to the characterisation, dialogue, costuming (or lack thereof) and gestures, as well as the passage of time and the significance of space (Mathews 2020:51). Being a prophet according to the Old Testament resembles the restrictions imposed upon modern day actors who must perform the scripts they were provided and sometimes have to say and do the unthinkable – like walking around (almost) naked in public (Mathews 2020:190–191).

Turning to symbolic interactionism, Herbert Blumer first coined the term 'symbolic interaction' in 1937 but clarified its central ideas in 1969. This term takes as its point of departure the emphasis that human conduct is above all meaningful and that people must interpret the meaning of each other's acts to respond appropriately to them.[4] Therefore, Blumer (1969:1–9) advocates symbolic interactionism as a sociological methodology that seeks to understand the symbolic processes that shape human interaction by means of the exploration of concrete situations.

Although 'symbol' is a key concept in this investigation, it is no easy task to define it. In seminal research, Geertz (1973) acknowledged the key role of symbols in religion when he defined religion as:

> (1) a system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and longstanding moods and motivations in men [*sic*] by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic. (p. 168)

3.Friebel (1998:383–384) investigated 'sign-acts' in Jeremiah and Ezekiel as forms of rhetorical nonverbal communication and concluded that the different sign-acts were motivated by the intent to communicate 'specific message content'. Krispenz (2004) did a pioneering performance study of sign-acts that focused on the centrality of the body in the communication of prophecy. In a similar vein, Ott (2009:28) described the prophetic 'sign-acts' as 'Analogiehandlungen' that were intended to stimulate attention for an important matter.

4.According to Anderson and Taylor (2004:23–24) society is constructed through ongoing human interaction and the meaning given to these interactions – 'people react and change, depending on the actions and reaction of the others'.

Literary and historical contexts of Isaiah 20

Although chapter 20 lacks a משא superscript, the prophetic collection in Isaiah 13–23 consists of 10 משא oracles against foreign nations that cannot be assigned to one period or a single author (Cook 2011:126; Erlandsson 1970:11). Although numerous foreign nations are implicated by these oracles of judgement, chapters 18–20 are directly focused on Egypt and Cush (ancient Nubia or Ethiopia, modern-day Sudan) and indirectly on the Kingdom of Judah.

It is important to note that the predominantly first-person poetic oracles in Isaiah 13–23 are interrupted by a third person prose passage in chapter 20. Isaiah 20 seems to be part of a series of prose narratives of datable events that provide a historical (even chronological) frame of reference for Isaiah 1–39.[5] The possibility that Isaiah 20 was inserted into its present position has been argued in contrasting ways: on the one hand, it is pointed out that there is a sharp contrast between the favourable attitude towards Egypt in chapter 19 in stark contrast to the threatening doom lurking for Egypt in chapter 20 (Balogh 2011:333), while on the other hand, one has to keep in mind that there seems to be a thematic unity, because both chapters 18 and 20 are related to the rise of the 25th ('Cushite') dynasty in Egypt and how this dynasty impacted on the Palestinian revolt against the Assyrian Empire and the eventual destruction of the Philistine city of Ashdod by the Assyrian army (Miller & Hayes 1986:352–353).

During the reign of Hezekiah over Judah (726–697 BCE), Assyria (Sargon II: 721–705; Sennacherib: 704–681 BCE), Babylonia (Merodach-baladan: 721–710 & 703 BCE) and Egypt (Osorkon IV: 720–715 BCE; Shabako: c.715–702 BCE) were the dominant political power-players in the ANE that did not allow Judah 'to assert its independence', despite numerous revolts by Palestinian vassal states instigated by Egypt and Babylonia against Assyria (Kitchen 2001:39; Matthews 2002:78).

Tiglat-pileser III led the first Assyrian campaign against Philistine city states – Gaza in 734 BCE and one year later against Ashkelon – but for the next decade, 'Philistia remained quiet' (Stern 2001:104–105). After the fall of Samaria and the Northern Kingdom (ca 722 BCE),[6] and the deportation of many of the inhabitants of Israel, another revolt took place in Samaria and Palestine that was squashed by Sargon II in 720 BCE, one year after his succession to the Assyrian throne.

A few years after the final subjugation of Samaria, Sargon II conducted two military campaigns in Palestine or southern Levant: in 716–715 BCE he conquered the western Sinai area

5.Machinist (1983:722) argued convincingly that chronological indicators or markers can be found in Isaiah 1:1; 6:1; 7; 14:28; as well as 36–39. The clearest datable passages are Isaiah 7 = 734/733 BCE; 14:28 = 716 BCE; 3639 = 701 BCE.

6.Because of the lack of Assyrian records from the reign of Shalmaneser V it is difficult to determine 'the historical detail of the fall of Samaria', but most scholars assume that he besieged Samaria in 725 BCE and conquered it three years later in 722 BCE (Wright & Elliot 2017:458).

(*COS* 2:293), and in 712–711 BCE he put down the revolt in Ashdod (*COS* 2: 304; Wright & Elliot 2017:459).

Towards a performative interpretation of Isaiah 20

In the following discussion of Isaiah 20, a performative interpretation will be attempted of the Hebrew text, while also taking into consideration where the Septuagint translation provides indications of reinterpretation in a later context.

It is important to note that the following six verses are written in the third person, and this probably suggests that the narrator 'offers an account concerning the prophet' and does not derive directly from a first-person account by Isaiah (Childs 2001:142). This is a narrative about Isaiah in an almost 'historiographic mode', with a 'chronological marker' when it took place, providing the prophet's name that includes his father (Amoz), and it refers to him being 'Yahweh's servant' (Blenkinsopp 2008:320).[7]

Isaiah 20:1 provides an indication about the historical context of this chapter by referring to the year in which Sargon II of Assyria sent his תַרְתָּן (related to the Assyrian *tardinnu* or *tirtanu*) or military second-in-command against rebellious vassal states in Palestine.[8] More information can be gleaned from Assyrian sources, the 'Annals of Khorsabad' and the 'Prisms of Nineveh' (ANET 286–287). According to these sources, Sargon II launched a campaign against Ashdod and fellow conspirators in 712 or 711 BCE to put down a rebellion among some of the Philistine city-states and their neighbours.

The exact date of this Assyrian punitive campaign is unsure because the ninth *palu* or regnal year mentioned in the Prism fragments (A 25–27) can either refer to 712 or 711 BCE (Döhling 2013:260).[9] According to the Assyrian sources mentioned above (ANET 286–287), Iamani (or Yamani) of Ashdod took the initiative in the rebellion against Assyria and attempted to gain the support of the 'Pir'u' of Egypt. This Egyptian pharaoh was possibly Bakenranef or Bocchoris (24th Dynasty) or more likely Shabaka or Shabako, the first monarch of the 25th Cushite or Ethiopian Dynasty (Kitchen 2001:39; Tadmor 1958:84).

During the rise of the Cushite Dynasty, a policy of reconciliation was followed with Assyria, and this led to a change in the usual honouring of the asylum rights of political refugees (Spalinger 1973:95). When Yamani fled to Egypt, after the capturing of Ashdod by the Assyrians, he was not granted asylum and was extradited in chains (naked and barefoot?) to Nineveh to avert Assyrian vengeance (Roberts 2015:267; Tadmor 1966:94).

A symbolic interactionist interpretation of Isaiah 20 will probably consider the 'historical' introduction in verse 1 to trigger an 'aura of factuality' that religion uses to clothe its conceptions in such a manner that it seems to be 'realistic'.[10]

The Septuagint translation refers to the 'tartan' or 'commander-in-chief' as Ταναθαν and twice to 'Ashdod' as Ἄζωτος,[11] while the king of Assyria is called Αρνα. 'Sargon' as king of Assyria is attested by 1QIsa, Tg and Vg, but the LXX has a garbled version (Roberts 2015:268).

Isaiah 20:2 starts with an enigmatic indication of time, בָּעֵת הַהִיא ('at that time'), because there is no clear coherence between the indicators of time in the first three verses of this chapter (Clements 1980:174; Tucker 1994:282–288). Before resorting to the deletion or emendation of the Masoretic text (MT), one must at least attempt to make sense of the text as is, despite the challenge that there is no clear chronology of historical events implied or alluded to. It is possible that this vagueness is deliberate to include related events leading up the Palestinian revolt and the Assyrian punitive retaliation in 711 BCE, as well as the historical fact that it was subsequently only after many years that Egypt was defeated and some of them taken away in captivity (Watts 1985:264).

One must take note of the (Deuteronomistic?) expression that denotes agency, דִּבֶּר יְהוָה בְּיַד ('spoken through the hand of Isaiah'), that suggests that the prophet was the vehicle through whom YHWH spoke, but this interpretation is problematised by the Septuagint reading of 'the Lord spoke to [πρὸς] Isaiah' (Ogden & Sterk 2011:550; Roberts 2015:268). This might indicate a changing view of the role of a prophet in the Septuagint.[12] The reference to Isaiah being the בֶן־אָמוֹץ ('son of Amos'), reminds one of the book's first verse and of chapters 36 and 39.

Of special importance for this contribution is the command of YHWH to Isaiah in this second verse to loosen or untie (לֵךְ וּפִתַּחְתָּ) 'the sackcloth' (הַשַּׂק) and take off 'his sandal(s)' (וְנַעַלְךָ תַחֲלֹץ).[13] There are diverging opinions about what the sackcloth implies: some scholars suggest that it denotes mourning (2 Sm

7. Blenkinsopp (2008:321–322) suggests that this 'historiographic mode' might be of 'Deuteronomistic origin', and this seems to be affirmed by the 'formulaic way of describing military campaigns' in 1 and 2 Kings, as well as the use of the temporal phrase בָּעֵת הַהִיא and the prophetic formula דִּבֶּר יְהוָה בְּיַד in verse 2.

8. The title is also mentioned in 2 Kings 18:17 and is used in Akkadian to refer to a senior military leader or even a crown-prince who had to represent the king – in this context it can be translated as 'second-in-command' (Wildberger 1978:748). Although Assyrian inscriptions state that Sargon himself undertook the campaign, this was probably because of the custom of kings in the ancient Near East to ascribe the victories of their subordinates to themselves (ANET 286).

9. Tadmor (1958:32, 93) prefers 712 BCE because he presupposes a system of dating that tried to conceal the military inactivity of Sargon II during the year of his accession to compensate for a 'lost' year!

10. This presupposes the function of symbols in religion as defined by Geertz (1973:168).

11. Emanuel Tov (2010:418) points out that Ἄζωτος, 'is the regular Greek name for Ashdod in the Hellenistic- Roman period'.

12. One can interpret this 'stylistic correction' as an attempt by the LXX translator to indicate that 'Yahweh's words are a request to the prophet, rather than the prophet speaking on behalf of Yahweh' (Ogden & Sterk 2011:550).

13. Watts (1985:264) quaintly refers to the sackcloth as the 'basic undergarment worn by men', but this might be a slight anachronistic conclusion more related to modern than ancient Near Eastern dress codes. While the MT has the singular 'and your sandal', 1QIsa, LXX, Vg and Syr have the plural that makes more sense (Roberts 2015:269).

21:10),[14] while others presume that it refers to the customary rough and hairy clothes of prophets (2 Ki 1:8).[15]

Furthermore, no final agreement has been reached whether Isaiah was stark naked or if he managed to retain a loincloth, but frankly it does not matter all that much in this instance. It is important to remember the scandalous nature of public nudity according to the Hebrew Bible (Gn 3:7 and 10; 9:22 and 2 Sm 6:20). Even more important is to keep in mind that nakedness, or at least scanty clothing, was characteristic of the appearance of prisoners of war and fugitives (2 Chr 28:5; Am 2;16 and Mi 1:8). This brings one to the conclusion that שַׂק was a rough and hairy garment that varied in shape, function and symbolic meaning. The act of removing the 'sandals' is possibly a sign of mourning or humiliation (Ezk 24:17 and 23). Verse 2 concludes with a description of how the prophet obeyed and walked about stripped of clothing (possibly naked) and barefoot. The term עָרוֹם does not necessarily refer to complete nudity (Wildberger 1978:756).

According to symbolic interactionism, the bare (foot?) prophet uses scanty or no clothing as signs that were conventionally associated with the appearance of captives taken into exile. At this stage it is at least clear that Isaiah received a command to execute a symbolic act, but with little clarity about what it entailed. Was the prophet naked or scantily dressed, and more important, was it aimed at Palestinian revolutionaries and Judah, or was it intended for Egypt and Cush? Both the indication of time in verse 1 and the removal of the sackcloth and sandals are uncertain, and the rest of chapter 20 must be taken into consideration before a final decision is made.

Isaiah 20:3 reports that YHWH refers to the prophet as עַבְדִּי ('my servant') and continues to describe how Isaiah obeyed the divine command to perform the challenging symbolic act to walk naked and barefoot for three years. There are numerous examples of prophets who are described in the Hebrew Bible as 'servants' of the Lord, such as Elijah (1 Ki 18:36 & 2 Ki 9:7) and Jonah the son of Amittai (2 Ki 14:25).

It is not clear when the 'three years' (שָׁלֹשׁ שָׁנִים) took place – possibly from the beginning of the Philistine rebellion in 713 BCE up to the destruction of Ashdod by the Assyrian army in 711 BCE.

The Lord continues to describe the naked and barefoot prophet in verse 3 as a 'sign' (אוֹת) and 'portent' (מוֹפֵת) against Egypt (מִצְרַיִם) and Cush or Ethiopia or Nubia (כּוּשׁ). What connection exists between the symbolic act of the prophet and the calamity it warns against? Is it possible that a form of analogic or sympathetic magic can be found in Isaiah 20? Fohrer (1968:25–47) argued that prophetic symbolic acts are not only didactic and homiletic tools but *'wirkungsmächtige*

und ereignisgeladene' deeds; but can this conclusion be substantiated from Isaiah 20, where the outcome of the symbolic act seems to depend on the power of YHWH who commanded it?

Can a performative approach to text interpretation and symbolic interactionism contribute to making sense of this extraordinary behaviour of the prophet? Was Isaiah considered to be a comical or irrational figure when he walked around Jerusalem with little or no clothes on for no apparent reason – an act of sheer folly (Wildberger 1978:757)? Furthermore, because public nudity was strictly forbidden, Isaiah would have been perceived to contravene legal prohibitions as reflected in the Torah – an irreverent or even rebellious act of disobedience.[16] It would make more sense if the significance and reasons for the symbolic act were made known to its audience from the start or that the reasons only eventually became clear; but what could these reasons be?

On the one hand, the symbolic act could have been understood as referring to the Palestinian revolt and the Assyrian capture of Ashdod, as well as to Egypt who left her allies in the lurch – that is, as a warning for the inhabitants of Ashdod and for the inhabitants of Jerusalem who might have been contemplating joining the uprising against Assyria and depending on Egyptian support.

On the other hand, it could have been interpreted as a prediction that Assyria would conquer Egypt and Cush sometime in the future and that many of their inhabitants would be led away as scantily clad prisoners of war (Watts 1985:264). But it might not be an either-or but both, because prophesies and symbolic acts need not only have one fulfilment.

It seems more likely that the symbolic act at first commented on the fate of Ashdod at the hands of the Assyrians and being forsaken by the Egyptians. It also anticipated the future fate of the Egyptians at the hands of the Assyrians, which is developed further in verse 4. There seems to be a clear legitimating shift from the 'earlier word against Philistia' to 'a prophecy directed to the future defeat of Egypt in chapter 19' (Childs 2001:142–143).

Before discussing verse 4, some attention must also be given to other symbolic acts performed by Isaiah. It is important to note that when Isaiah gave his children symbolic names in 8:18, this action of the prophet is also depicted as a 'sign' and a 'portent' (Clements 1980:175).

Closer scrutiny is also required for the use of אוֹת and מוֹפֵת in passages outside of Isaiah. Deuteronomy (13:1,2; 28:46; 29:3; 34:11) and Jeremiah (32:20–21) reveal an evidentiary function of the symbolic or sign-act that excludes the possibility of a causal relationship between the sign and the event referred to (Oswalt 1986:386).[17] This leads to the important distinction

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14. Oswalt (1986:385) considered sackcloth to be a 'normal' sign of mourning, while Roberts (2015:268–269) described it as 'a heavy coarse cloth' that was 'normally worn next to the skin as a sign of mourning'.

15. Bronner (1980:32), however, points out that there is no clear evidence in the Hebrew Bible that שַׂק was ever regarded as a garment for prophets because it was worn by people from all walks of life during times of mourning – kings, commoners and prophets alike.

16. Niehr (2001:351) points out that the adj. ערום occurs 15 times in the OT, and apart from Genesis 2:25, all are used in negative contexts, denoting 'poverty, need, vulnerability, grief, captivity or adultery'.

17. In his later NIVAC commentary, Oswalt (2003) comes to a similar conclusion that the symbolic action 'has evocative power, not causal power'.

between magical acts, which seem to contain power in themselves to produce an effect, and prophetic symbolic acts that are based on the effective power of YHWH (Kaiser 1974:115).

Isaiah 20:4 provides further explanation of the enigmatic 'sign' and 'portent' of the previous verse and relates it to a future defeat and exile of the inhabitants in Egypt and Cush by the Assyrians. The initial good relations between the 25th (Cushite) Dynasty and Assyria became strained and culminated in the battle of Eltekeh or Elthake, when Sennacherib defeated Egypt in 701 BCE (Stern 2001:106). It is of further importance to note that the first occurrence of major Egyptian captivity by the Assyrians, after 711 BCE, only took place in 671 BCE during the reign of Essarhaddon, who defeated pharaoh Tirhakah and occupied Memphis (Oswalt 1986:386). A few years later, Ashurbanipal crushed a second Egyptian uprising in 667 BCE and exiled the rebel princes to Nineveh, closely resembling the description in verse 4 (Watts 1985:265).

The nonspecific reference to the 'king of Assyria' (מֶלֶךְ־אַשּׁוּר) contrasts with the specific mention of Sargon II in verse 1, and this might point to a time after the death of Sargon II in 705 BCE (Clements 1980:175). According to Roberts (2015:269) the Septuagint seems to have a simplified reference to כּוּשׁ alone and omits the additional qualification of 'the exiles' (אֶת־גָּלוּת).

Since the influential Isaiah commentary by Duhm ([1892]1968:149) suggested it in 1892, many scholars have taken the Septuagint's omission of עֶרְוַת מִצְרַיִם ('shame of Egypt') seriously and considered it to be a later addition or a gloss (Clements 1980; Kaiser 1974; Wildberger 1978), while more recently, commentators do not presuppose its late addition (Balogh 2011:309). It is important to note that Egypt and Cush are mentioned together, both in verses 3 and 4, while they are addressed separately in the preceding chapters 18 and 19 (Wildberger 1978:759). This probably indicates other periods of time when different relationships existed between Egypt and Cush, or it can be the result of a much later and less informed understanding of older international politics in the ANE.[18]

Isaiah 20:5 contains pronouns that either refer to the Egyptian captives and Cushite exiles in verse 4 or anticipate the Philistine inhabitants of the coastland mentioned in verse 6 (Ogden & Sterk 2011:554). There is no clear textual evidence to argue that verse 5 is directed at Judah alone and not at all the members of the Palestinian conspiracy, although one must keep in mind that Jerusalem was the context within which the symbolic act was performed. Although the sign-act initially concerned Ashdod and the Philistine revolt, the audience in Jerusalem, between the past exile of the Northern Kingdom and the future exile of the Southern Kingdom, was also addressed by this warning not to rely on Egypt and Cush (Tucker 1994:286). It is striking that the Septuagint

reformulates the MT by making Egypt the subject who then becomes dismayed and ashamed of Cush (Balogh 2011:310; Roberts 2015:268). This reformulation might suggest a later Hellenistic context during which Egyptian rebels had placed their hopes on Ethiopian or Cushite support for their revolt against their Ptolemaic overlords, only to be disappointed. This is an ironical reversal from the MT version that alluded to Judah's vain hope for Egyptian and Cushite support against Assyria (Seeligmann 1948:90).

Isaiah 20:6 is the last verse of the chapter and provides important clues about the way the historical context was utilised as backdrop for the theological message the prophet intended to communicate. The interjective marker of attention (הנה) indicates the importance of the explanation of the sign-act that is provided in the following clauses. For the first time, mention is made of the (Philistine?) 'inhabitants of the coastland' (יֹשֵׁב הָאִי) who experienced despair because of the fate of the Egyptians at the hands of the Assyrians because it dashed all their expectations to be delivered from the 'king of Assyria' who is also mentioned in verse 1 to form an *inclusio*. By using בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא ('in that day') as an indication of time, verse 6 relates to events mentioned in previous verses and the omission of the phrase by the Septuagint might indicate a later edition (Ogden & Sterk 2011:554).

Because the last phrase וְאֵיךְ נִמָּלֵט אֲנָחְנוּ ('how then can / shall we escape?') comprises an open-ended question, it potentially incorporates all the parties taking part in the revolt, entails a specific message for Judah and opens '*immer mehrere Deutungsmöglichkeiten*' (Liss 2003:296–297). Furthermore, Döhling (2013:260) argues convincingly that verses 4–6 focused Isaiah's sign-act as a warning aimed at the anti-Assyrian and pro-Egyptian lobby in Jerusalem.

Conclusion

A performative criticism and symbolic interactionist interpretation of Isaiah 20 considers the historical introduction of verse 1 to be part of the 'aura of factuality' that religious texts use to articulate or 'clothe' their prophecies in such a manner that it seems to be more realistic or 'history-like'. According to these exegetical methodologies, the bare (foot?) prophet uses nudity or scanty clothing as a 'sign and portent' associated with captives taken into exile. The exact dating becomes less important, and verse 1 needs only be interpreted as an initial first reference to the capture of Ashdod, circa 711 BCE, that does not preclude further reinterpretation and appropriation ('*Fortschreibung*') in subsequent periods of Judean history.[19]

One must also take into consideration that the capture of Ashdod (711 BCE) takes place soon after the Assyrian capture and exile of the Northern Kingdom and Samaria (722 BCE) and before the eventual capture and exile of the Southern Kingdom and Jerusalem (586 BCE). Even after the fall of Jerusalem and the Babylonian exile of its inhabitants,

18.In this regard one should also note that from about 664 BCE onwards, the 25th Dynasty came to an end and the thrones of Egypt and Cush were again separated (Kitchen 2001:38).

19.Hayes (2011:550) mentions that the author of so-called Deutero-Isaiah (chapters 40–55) was responsible for this 'Fortschreibung' as redactor of chapters 1–33.

the symbolic or sign-act of Isaiah remained relevant because it reminded the exiles that they had ample prophetic warnings that they should not put their trust in political alliances that ignored their primary obligations with YHWH.

The expansive Septuagint translation of Isaiah 20 not only simplified and clarified aspects of the MT, but also reformulated a larger section (such as verse 5) to appropriate the sign-act for Hellenistic audiences who had views of prophecy and the role of Egypt that differed from their Judean predecessors. One must take note of Arie Van der Kooij's (1998:346) conclusion in his study of the Septuagint version of Isaiah that in the 'Hellenistic period the mode of reading prophecies as predictions of the recent past, the present, and the near future of the reader/interpreter was the prevailing one' – an understanding of prophecy that allowed ongoing appropriations.

The theological interpretation of religious texts can benefit from performative criticism and a symbolic interactionist interpretation of texts like Isaiah 20 by detecting the interaction between the actors by scrutinising the symbolic reference of their provocative acts – walking around in the nude or scantily clothed. Isaiah 20 describes one of the several 'acted-out signs' in the prophetic books of the Old Testament and can be interpreted as 'a kind of street theatre', for which performative criticism can be considered as an appropriate exegetical methodology.[20]

The bottom line is not the capture of Ashdod and the forced exile of its inhabitants, but the use of symbolic, scandalous sign-acts to exhort Judah to rely on the protection of YHWH alone and not put its trust in superpowers such as Egypt or Cush.[21] Prophetic performance of provocative sign-acts rang true throughout the ages and should stimulate ongoing reflection about the future realisation of Isaiah 20's theological significance – actions speak louder than words, even after they have become words.[22]

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Competing interests

Author's contributions

H.B. is the sole author of this article.

20. Blenkinsopp (2008:323) also refers to several other examples of acted-out street theatre in prophetic literature (Jr 27:1–28:17; Ezk 4:1–17; 5:1–4; 12:1–7).

21. Aster (2007:278, 2015:453) concludes that Isaiah not only recognised the power of Assyria, but also attempted to reconcile it with the power of YHWH by what he describes as 'replacement theology', according to which the sovereignty of YHWH is described in terms of Assyrian claims of universal dominium.

22. Isaiah was more than a mere mouthpiece to convey divine instructions, but he used his body to convey a provocative and challenging message to those parties in Jerusalem who did not trust in the power of the Lord (Frolov 2011:85).

Ethical considerations

Funding information

Data availability

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Disclaimer

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