

## **The Tension between Experiences of Nothingness and Hope in the Metaphorical Meaning of the Names of the Children (Isaiah 7–8) from a Perspective of Generational Imprinted Trauma and Resilience**

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### **ABSTRACT<sup>1</sup>**

*The texts of Isaiah 7 and 8 are a paragon of metaphorical meanings and signs, especially as they pertain to the name-giving of Isaiah’s sons: Shear-Jashub, Immanuel, and Maher-shalal-hash-baz. This opens a scope of possibilities for Biblical scholars as hardly any research has been done on the implications and corollaries of the three sign names. The significance of children and the function they have within the Hebrew Bible are investigated to give a better understanding of the prophetic utterance of Isaiah. Furthermore, when a perspective of generational imprinted trauma<sup>2</sup> is applied to explore and understand the text, an opportunity arises to assess the text within the parameters of pre-migration and the ensuing traumatic experiences. The metaphorical names give us as biblical scholars a glimpse into the possible outcome of fear and threat that is posed by the Syro-Ephraimite coalition and the Assyrian campaign. Within the three sign-names, the pragmatics of individual and collective trauma, healing, and resilience are also underpinned. As the axes sway between*

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<sup>1</sup> In this article, we acknowledge our indebtedness to work already done in a previous study. Still, our contribution represents a thoroughly reworked and updated version of the material used. Cf. Elizabeth Esterhuizen, “A Study of the Tension between Despair and Hope in Isaiah 7 and 8 from a Perspective of Trauma and Posttraumatic Growth” (DTh thesis, Unisa, 2016).

<sup>2</sup> See also Elizabeth Esterhuizen and Alphonso Groenewald, “Rereading Isaiah’s Vision (Isa 6) through the Lens of Generational Imprinted Trauma and Resilience,” *OTE* 36.1 (2023): 285–313, <http://dx.doi.org/10.17159/2312-3621/2023/v36n1a16>.

*hopelessness (nothingness) and hopefulness, the sign-names of the children provide dualistic solutions of either divine punishment or the restitution of a remaining remnant through complete faith and the knowledge that 'God is with us'.*

**KEYWORDS:** Generational imprinted trauma, resilience, sign-acts, metaphorical sign-names, nothingness, hope, remnant, Shear-jashub, Immanuel, Maher-shalal-hash-baz, 'God with us', Syro-Ephraimite war, Assyria, trauma markers

## A INTRODUCTION

The American writer and poet Gertrude Stein's famous line "Rose is a rose is a rose is a rose" comes from her poem "Sacred Emily" (published in 1913) and this line had a major impact on poetry and literary criticism in the twentieth century.<sup>3</sup> This line has often been interpreted as meaning that all roses are the same; in other words, suggesting that things are what they are or seem to be what one thinks they are or should be. If this is the case, it implies that if any noun or name is mentioned, it immediately calls to mind imagery, associations, and emotions that are related to this noun or word.<sup>4</sup> However, according to Ashton,<sup>5</sup> in lines like these the meaning of a word(s) becomes indeterminate, as "Rose" can refer to a person's name or "rose" can refer to a flower (which has many different forms, colours, and aromas), thus implying that the same word can have completely different meanings, nuances and even semantics. We thus have to learn to accept the ambiguity inherent in a word(s).

When shifting our focus from roses to people, and for our purpose in this contribution when we focus on individuals who were designated as prophets in the ancient Israelite and Judean society, we also have to accept the inherent ambiguity contained in the term "prophet," as well as the "prophetic roles" given to a specific person or individual. At this point in the discussion, we indeed have to ask ourselves the question, whether Isaiah simply is "a prophet is a prophet is a prophet is a prophet", or is the prophet Isaiah may be a thorn in the comparison when referring to the original line by Gertrude Stein ("Rose is a rose is a rose is a rose")? Can we accept the ambiguity inherent in the portrayal of Isaiah as a

<sup>3</sup> Jennifer Ashton, "'Rose Is a Rose': Gertrude Stein and the Critique of Indeterminacy," *Modernism/Modernity* 9.4 (2002): 581, <https://doi.org/10.1353/mod.2002.0063>; Robert F. Fleissner, "Stein's Four Roses," *Journal of Modern Literature* 6.2 (1977): 325.

<sup>4</sup> Ashton, "Rose Is a Rose," 602 writes as follows: "If Stein can 'really caress' the noun by rendering it as a name, it is neither the material form - the petals and thorns - of the floral object it denotes nor the material form - the sound and shape - of the word that denotes it. What Stein caresses in caressing the 'rose' is the immaterial form - the very function of reference - belonging to the name itself." Cf. also Esterhuizen, "A Study of the Tension between Despair and Hope," 1.

<sup>5</sup> Ashton, "Rose Is a Rose," 581-82.

prophet and the character Isaiah in the text? In other words, on the one hand, he is depicted as a prophet who proclaims judgment, but on the other hand, he is also a beacon of hope and resilience in the midst of feelings of nothingness as a result of the despair and overwhelming feelings of hopelessness that overwhelmed the people. The text oscillates the whole time between despair and nothingness, as well as hope, resilience, fullness, and the breadth of possibilities.

Furthermore, it is impossible to group any person(s) or individual(s) who were depicted as a prophet(s) together and to assert that the following saying applies to him/her/them as well, namely that "a prophet is a prophet is a prophet." Prophets and, subsequently, their respective prophetic roles would have been determined by the geographical as well as historical context in which they functioned, thus; implying we need to keep in mind several different contexts of understanding.<sup>6</sup> The literary portrayal of a prophet or prophetic figure differed from book to book, as scribal activity also may have differed from time to time and from book to book, even within a prophetic book.<sup>7</sup> Berges, therefore, infers that in the book of Isaiah, we first of all encounter the book<sup>8</sup> which is named after the prophet Isaiah, and subsequently, we meet the prophet (figure) Isaiah, who is *in* the literary testimony in this major piece of literature.<sup>9</sup> The book contains many other anonymous figures who are hiding behind the figure of Isaiah, and subsequently, it can be inferred that "he is the implied author who guides his

<sup>6</sup> Stephen L. Cook, John T. Strong, and Steven S. Tuell, *The Prophets: Introducing Israel's Prophetic Writings* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2022), 29; Carolyn J Sharp, *Old Testament Prophets for Today* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 3.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. for example, Sharp, *Old Testament Prophets for Today*,<sup>13</sup> who infers as follows: "The Hebrew Scriptures present us with two radically different views of the prophetic word. There is a striking difference between the prophetic word in the Deuteronomistic History and the prophetic word in the Latter prophets ... In Samuel and Kings, the prophetic word is always fulfilled. It is always an efficacious word: prophets predict the future, and God's word inevitably comes to pass. But in the Latter Prophets, the perspective is quite different. The prophets have pleaded with the people for generation after generation to no avail. For these prophets, the prophetic word is not something that is inevitably fulfilled. To the contrary, it is resisted and ignored for generations by those who hear it."

<sup>8</sup> Cf. also Odil H Steck, *The Prophetic Books and Their Theological Witness* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2000),<sup>7</sup> who infers as follows: "This much is clear: The prophet is only provided in the superimposition of a relatively lengthy process of tradition that may have played a more or less active role. This process results in the prophetic writings. This situation means that the book stands in front of the prophet. Anyone wishing to find the prophet must first go through the book. In contrast to the long-dominant quest for the prophetic persons, the most pressing task now is an illuminating inquiry into the prophetic books."

<sup>9</sup> Ulrich Berges, *Isaiah. The Prophet and His Book* (trans. P Sumpter; Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2012), 1; Ulrich Berges, "The Book of Isaiah as Isaiah's Book: The Latest Developments in the Research of the Prophets," *OTE* 23.3 (2010): 549–53.

readers through the historical vision that has now become a book (cf. Isaiah 7). These scribes have ascribed their work to the famous Jerusalem prophet, for they know that despite all discontinuities and new beginnings they are related to his body of thought."<sup>10</sup>

Therefore, the interpretation of any prophetic text (e.g. the book of Isaiah) is challenging as we need to break open the layers of historical interpretations inherent within these texts, i.e. how he was remembered by later communities. But most of all, we need to reinterpret and reformulate these "old truths" for new times and contexts within the current world in which we are living today.<sup>11</sup> The world is rotating on her axis because of the aftermath of a pandemic, which, unfortunately, is still prevalent and impacts most parts of the world.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, we can mention socio-economic challenges and injustices, governmental instabilities, and major ecological crises which face the world. This uncertainty, fear and anxiety caused by a lack of a future prospect creates traumatic feelings of nothingness for many people around the globe.

For the purpose of our analysis and contribution, this article focuses on two central chapters in the book of Isaiah, namely chapters 7-8, considering the fluctuating tension between the experiences of nothingness (even despair) and moments of hope and resilience that embody the notion of everything in these chapters. As the book of Isaiah constantly oscillates between prophecies of judgment and salvation, the verses of these two chapters abound with aspects of trauma and resilience, which are highlighted by the symbols, imagery and trauma-specific metaphors which are all related to the trauma experienced by the prophet, king Ahaz and the people of Judah.

Trauma is part of life today and since the beginning of time. Questions of whether trauma in its broader sense is representable at all, and to use a more clarifying term "speaking" underline our inexplicable, sometimes impossible endeavour to explain and most of the time, leave a verbal gap that plunges into a void of nothingness. The aim of this contribution, therefore, is to address the issue of nothingness (despair) and hope in these two chapters and, particularly, the role that *generational imprinted trauma*<sup>13</sup> and resilience played in this regard.

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<sup>10</sup> Berges, *Isaiah. The Prophet and His Book*, 2.

<sup>11</sup> Esterhuizen, "A Study of the Tension between Despair and Hope," 1.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. in this regard, Elizabeth Esterhuizen and Alphonso Groenewald, "'And It Shall Come to Pass on That Day, the Lord Will Whistle for the Fly Which Is at the End of the Water Channels of Egypt, and for the Bee Which Is in the Land of Assyria' (Is 7:18): Traumatic Impact of the Covid-19 Virus as a Lens to Read Isaiah 7:18–25," *HTS* 77.3 (2021): 1–7, <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v77i3.6333>.

<sup>13</sup> According to us, this term implies that past, present and possible future trauma have an implicit impact on generations. Therefore, we would like to coin this *new term* in order to describe this process as *generational imprinted trauma*. Furthermore, for us,

## B CHILDREN’S NAMES

The well-known expression, “Children should be seen but not heard” has been around for many years, even centuries.<sup>14</sup> So much so that it is sometimes quoted as if it is a command written in the Bible. The ambiguity of this expression, in a sense, underscores the nothingness of a child’s validity, but it also amplifies the somethingness of their existence and symbolic meaning because the “seen” becomes a loud visual noise that must be heard. This diminutive viewpoint of children also highlights the importance of children and the unspoken role that they played in the biblical world. Noting that children are integral in the text of the Hebrew Bible, it is almost ironic that they are so often invisible and therefore overlooked by scholars in their search to understand the biblical text.<sup>15</sup> In the field of biblical studies, there has been a lack of research on the impact of trauma on children, but this is now changing. As with trauma interpretation, a childhood lens could provide a new and interesting scope on biblical texts.<sup>16</sup>

The text of Isaiah 7 and 8 leaves one with a conundrum. The theme of both chapters centres around the three children and the symbolism of their respective names through their name-giving. However, almost nothing can be found in the text that portrays their significant roles as children per se and the role they played in the prophecy of Isaiah, as it was intended for King Ahaz and the people of Judah. Even less is written about the perpetual trauma of name-giving and how it shatters the sense of coherence and meaning for the prophet and the nation.<sup>17</sup> Meaning is patterned as an inner narrative or story, sometimes over generations, to give explanations and hope.

Isaiah’s prophecy in chapters 7 and 8, through the name-giving of the children, metaphorically showcases the ruptures of possible suffering embedded in generational imprinted experiences of political violence, looming exile, pre-migration anxiety and desolation. All these traumatic circumstances encapsulated in the name-giving of the children were ancient traumas that formed part of the re-lived generational imprinted trauma of loss and fear. The

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this term implies “grief within grief.” See also Esterhuizen and Groenewald, “Rereading Isaiah’s Vision (Isa 6),” 287–90.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. also Reggie Nel, “‘Children Must Be Seen and Heard’ - Doing Postcolonial Theology with Children in a (Southern) African Reformed Church,” *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies* 72.1 (2016): 1, <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v72i1.3565>.

<sup>15</sup> Reidar Aasgaard, “History of Research on Children in the Bible and the Biblical World: Past Developments, Present State - and Future Potential,” in *T&T Clark Handbook of Children in the Bible and the Biblical World* (ed. Sharon Betsworth and Julie F Parker; London, UK; New York, NY: T&T Clark, 2019), 13–17.

<sup>16</sup> Sharon Betsworth and Julie F Parker, “Introduction,” in *T&T Clark Handbook of Children in the Bible and the Biblical World* (ed. Sharon Betsworth and Julie F Parker; London, UK; New York, NY: T&T Clark, 2019), 1–2; Aasgaard, “History of Research on Children,” 16.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Esterhuizen, “A Study of the Tension between Despair and Hope,” 174.

remnant of traumas remains within the generational fibre with pieces of hope and resilience, Elkins<sup>18</sup> writes that "focusing on the survival that comes after trauma, means that the violence is acknowledged but so is the recovery and resilience."

The metaphorical names of the children, namely *Shear-jashub*, *Immanuel* and *Maher-shalal-hash-baz*, as it were embodied in their symbolic existence, had abstruse traumatic consequences on the Judean historical and cultural scene. The names of the children encapsulate a plethora of the despair and hope of the past, the turmoil of the present and the possible hope of the future. Therefore, making the name-giving, in a sense, the notion that nothingness is everything and in everything, lies nothingness. The name-giving in Isaiah 7 and 8 presents a pre-migration<sup>19</sup> text full of trauma and collective traumatic experiences which are contained in the symbolic names and embodiment of the children. Using a trauma perspective as well as a pre-migration lens to read the text, an attempt will be made to address the onset and extension of trauma as nothingness and the possibility of hope within the name-giving of the children.

There is, however, no conclusive exegetical agreement whether "Immanuel" was the prophet's or another's child, as the narrator (scribe) does not state this fact clearly.<sup>20</sup> Childs,<sup>21</sup> for example, infers as follows in this regard:

One of the most significant features of this verse is the mysterious, even vague and indeterminate, tone that pervades the entire passage. The reader is simply not given information regarding the identity of the maiden, or how precisely the sign functions in relation to the giving of the name Immanuel. It is, therefore, idle to speculate on these matters; rather, the reader can determine if there are other avenues of understanding opened up by the larger context.

Whatever the case may be regarding the child's parental identity, in this contribution we focus on the implications this name has for the narrative as a pre-migration text, as well as the specific trauma markers inherent in this text as well as in these names.

<sup>18</sup> Kathleen G. Elkins, "Children and the Memory of Traumatic Violence," in *T&T Clark Handbook of Children in the Bible and the Biblical World* (ed. Sharon Betsworth and Julie F Parker; London, UK; New York, NY: T&T Clark, 2019), 188.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. also in this regard, Elizabeth Esterhuizen and Alphonso Groenewald, "Towards a Theology of Migration: A Survival Perspective from Isaiah 1-12," *Transilvania* 10 (2021): 34–41.

<sup>20</sup> Willem A M. Beuken, *Jesaja 1-12* (trans. Ulrich F Berges; Herders Theologischer Kommentar Zum Alten Testament; Freiburg i.Br.: Herder, 2003), 203–5; Jimmy J M. Roberts, *First Isaiah: A Commentary* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2015), 119; Patricia K Tull, *Isaiah 1-39* (Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary; Macon: Smyth & Helwys, 2010), 166.

<sup>21</sup> Brevard S. Childs, *Isaiah* (Old Testament Library; Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 66.

The central message of Isaiah's prophecy in chapters 7 and 8 is the giving of signs<sup>22</sup> to accentuate his prophetic intent. In these two chapters, three prominent signs are given to King Ahaz and the people of Judah to indicate YHWH's message and intentions. It is important to remember that these names are not merely symbolic in their prophetic nature in so far as to convey Isaiah's prophetic message to a specific audience, but that the names were those of actual children. These children functioned and formed part of a household(s) within the community of Judah. Their lives, purpose and meaning are intertwined in the prophetic history (and culture) of the time, rendering them and the community vulnerable to possible traumatic events. Yet biblical scholars have largely overlooked the possible trauma implications and vestiges of survival, hope and resilience of their names within the prophetic message.

### C ISAIAH 7-8

During the latter half of the 8<sup>th</sup> century, the modest kingdom of Judah found itself – once again – at the mercy of other nations due to larger political developments and events taking place in the Ancient Near East. One of the major characteristics of this period was the instability on the larger political scene caused by the expansionistic policies of the neo-Assyrian king Tiglath-Pileser III during his reign 745/744-727 BCE.<sup>23</sup> His rising to the throne once again marks a new beginning of Assyria's imperial phase, and as a consequence it became a political and military powerhouse in the Ancient Near East, dominating the political playfield as well as determining the rise and fall of many nations that crossed their path.<sup>24</sup> The Assyrians employed several tactics to keep the territories under their control; namely, they destroyed cities, burdened the conquered nations with heavy tributes and looted the economies of entire regions.<sup>25</sup>

The Assyrians threatened and harassed the vassal states to show their political power. Their independence was diminished step by step, and finally,

<sup>22</sup> John J. Collins, "The Sign of Immanuel," in *Prophecy and Prophets in Ancient Israel: Proceedings of the Oxford Old Testament Seminar* (ed. John Day; Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies 531; London, UK; New York, NY: T & T Clark, 2010), 228; Georg Fohrer, *Die symbolischen Handlungen der Propheten* (2., überarb. und erweitert.; Abhandlungen zur Theologie des Alten und Neuen Testaments 54; Zürich: Zwingli Verlag, 1968), 29–31.

<sup>23</sup> Peter Dubovský, "Tiglath-Pileser III's Campaigns in 734-732 B.C.: Historical Background of Isa 7; 2 Kgs 15-16 and 2 Chr 27-28," *Biblica* 87.2 (2006): 153, 164.

<sup>24</sup> Mary K Y H. Hom, *The Characterization of the Assyrians in Isaiah: Synchronic and Diachronic Perspectives* (Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies 559; London; New York: T & T Clark, 2012), 1; Eckart Frahm, "The Neo-Assyrian Period (ca. 1000–609 BCE)," in *Companion to Assyria* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2017), 161; cf. also Esterhuizen, "A Study of the Tension between Despair and Hope in Isaiah 7 and 8 from a Perspective of Trauma and Posttraumatic Growth," 50.

<sup>25</sup> Dubovský, "Tiglath-Pileser III's Campaigns in 734-732 B.C.: Historical Background of Isa 7; 2 Kgs 15-16 and 2 Chr 27-28," 168.

they were incorporated into the provincial structures of the Assyrian Empire. These tactics created traumatic experiences, fear, and anxiety, not only for the people of Judah but also for the other neighbouring nations.<sup>26</sup> The political dynamics of this period heightened the looming danger and possible trauma that awaited them as the continuous exposure to the Assyrian threats to become a vassal state caused distress, panic, and anxiety in many nations.

According to Dubovský<sup>27</sup> the Levant saw a number of shifts in alliances during this time, and Syria and Palestine were no exception to the rule. Israel's alliance with Aram caused tension and hostility between the previous partners, Judah-Israel to the point that they became enemies. This alliance between Aram and Israel is referred to as the Syro-Ephraimite coalition (734-732 BCE),<sup>28</sup> and this event is the historical setting for the significance of the name-giving of Isaiah's children.<sup>29</sup> The first seventeen verses of chapter 7 narrate the

<sup>26</sup> Esterhuizen, "A Study of the Tension between Despair and Hope," 51.

<sup>27</sup> Dubovský, "Tiglath-Pileser III's Campaigns in 734-732 B.C.: Historical Background of Isa 7; 2 Kgs 15-16 and 2 Chr 27-28," 154.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Dubovský, "Tiglath-Pileser III's Campaigns in 734-732 B.C.: Historical Background of Isa 7; 2 Kgs 15-16 and 2 Chr 27-28," 154–55 who infers as follows regarding this alliance and its threat to Judah: "The result of this shift of allegiance was that Judah lost some territories and was even invaded by Aram, Israel, Edom and Philistia (2 Kgs 15-16, 2 Chr 28; Isa 7). In scholarly literature several theories about the nature and the goals of the Syro-Ephraimite league and their invasion of Judah have been advanced. B. Oded, whose opinion has been followed by most modern scholars, convincingly argued that the main reason for the Aram-Israel attack against Judah was control over Transjordan. Thus, the coalition Aram-Israel was primarily interested in territorial expansion and not in forming an anti-Assyrian league as was thought earlier. C.S. Ehrlich applied this logic to Phoenicia and Philistia. Thus, both Phoenicia and Philistia, even though presented as Assyrian enemies, were primarily interested in controlling the lucrative Levantine trade routes and ports along the Mediterranean coast. However, even though from the modern historians' point of view the Levantine states were not primarily interested in forming an anti-Assyrian league, from the Assyrian point of view the aspirations of the Levantine states for economic independence and their attempt to expand their territories were perceived as an anti-Assyrian activity. At the heart of this movement was Damascus (Aramean tribes) and Samaria (tribes in Northern Israel)."

<sup>29</sup> Hugh G M. Williamson, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Isaiah 1-27. Volume 2. Commentary on Isaiah 6-12* (ICC; London; New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2018), 108–10 infers as follows in this regard: "One particular historical question, where again an overwhelming consensus has occasionally been challenged, concerns the historical setting of the passage as a whole. The usual view, often dubbed the Syro-Ephraimite war (or crisis), assumes that the purpose of the coalition was to force Judah into their anti-Assyrian partnership, even though this is not directly mentioned in the passage. The broad outline of events during these crucial years (734–732 BCE) and their historical background is reasonably well known from other biblical as well as Assyrian sources and need not, perhaps, be rehearsed again here .... Thus,

encounter(s) between Isaiah and King Ahaz during a time when the royal family and Jerusalem were threatened by this Aram-Israel coalition.<sup>30</sup> According to this narrative, Rezin, the Aramean king of Damascus, and Pekah, the king of Israel (probably with support from Philistine and Phoenicia) threatened to attack Judah and Jerusalem in order to overthrow Ahaz and to replace him with the son of Tabeel; the logic being that he probably would have been more submissive to their alliance policies.<sup>31</sup>

Subsequently, Tiglath-pileser III launched a campaign in this area to dismantle the alliance consisting of Tyre, Damascus and the northern Kingdom of Israel.<sup>32</sup> According to the Assyrian Annals, they were tribute bearers to the Assyrians during the years 740-738 BCE, and therefore, any political aspirations of these nations would have been regarded as political pride that needed to be punished. Tiglath-pileser III undertook military action against this alliance, resulting in the defeat of Damascus, as well as the occupation of large parts of the Northern Kingdom and Tyre, which *de facto* meant they were turned into Assyrian provinces. This imperial policy meant that

[d]uring the reign of Tiglath-pileser, Assyria exercised her control over the other nations of the Near East with a system of varying degrees of domination, depending on the subordinate nation's obedience. If, at the outset, a city submitted to Assyria, the local ruler would retain their throne, accept the Assyrian king as their overlord, and become a vassal ... If the local ruler fought or defied the Assyrian king once vassaldom was accepted, they would be replaced by a puppet ruler and suffer the burden of heavier annual tribute and more restricting treaty or oath conditions. The replacement of Peka with Hoshea is an example of this. Often acts of rebellion would then draw the punishment of a territory being annexed and transformed into an Assyrian province. This meant a total loss of autonomy, as Assyrian governors replaced the local leaders, a high chance of deportation

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while I accept that the historical setting of this chapter cannot be finally determined, I believe that the usual scenario provides the most satisfying possibility. Nevertheless, the very fact that there is less certainty than is usually implied needs to be borne in mind in interpreting the purpose of the present narrative on its own terms, not in terms imposed from some hypothetical external source of knowledge." Cf. also Dubovsky, "Tiglath-Pileser III's Campaigns in 734-732 B.C.: Historical Background of Isa 7; 2 Kgs 15-16 and 2 Chr 27-28," 153-70; Luis R Siddall, "Tiglath-Pileser III's Aid to Ahaz: A New Look at the Problems of the Biblical Accounts in Light of the Assyrian Sources," *ANES* 46 (2009): 93-106, <https://doi.org/10.2143/ANES.46.0.2040712>.

<sup>30</sup> Tull, *Isaiah 1-39*, 157-58.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. also Jimmy J M. Roberts, *First Isaiah: A Commentary* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2015), 107 infers in this regard: "The identity of this Tabeel is uncertain, and the name itself may be garbled. One suggestion is that the allies' candidate for the throne was a son of king Ittobaal of Tyre."

<sup>32</sup> Siddall, "Tiglath-Pileser III's Aid to Ahaz," 94.

occurring and loss of control over the local economy. An example of this is the provincialism of Damascus after the Syro-Ephraimite war.<sup>33</sup>

This crisis – in spite of the fact that the historical background cannot be determined with certainty<sup>34</sup> – forms the setting for the narrative which unfolds in these two chapters. The names of the children are significant for the theme of these chapters, namely that a message of encouragement and hope was given to King Ahaz and the people of Judah by the prophet Isaiah.<sup>35</sup> An encounter (possibly two – cf. 7:3.10) takes place between the two men, and the prophet’s message is quite clear: as king of Judah, you have to put your trust in YHWH. Ahaz decides against this advice and puts his hopes on Assyria;<sup>36</sup> in other words, he chooses the path of politics and not of faith (cf. “If you do not stand firm in faith, you shall not stand at all” – Isa 7:9).

Chapters 7 and 8 describe the prophet and the other role players’ thoughts on this persisting threat.<sup>37</sup> Ahaz panics, and chapter 7:2 highlights both his as well as the people’s overwhelming feelings of fear: “The heart of Ahaz and the heart of his people shook as the trees of the forest shake before the wind.”<sup>38</sup> Isaiah’s prophetic utterances to have faith and hope in YHWH also carry a silent judgment and warning of what would happen if the king had a lack of faith. Despair would follow, and when the Assyrian threats were fulfilled, the people of Judah would suffer immensely. However, the king and the people of Judah become deaf and blind – as is written in Isaiah 6 – and they become unmoved in their acceptance of Isaiah’s prophetic words and encouragement. Even though Isaiah’s prophetic messages are laced with judgment and feelings of desolation, they also carry messages in equal measures of expectation and hope.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>33</sup> Siddall, “Tiglath-Pileser III’s Aid to Ahaz,” 99–100.

<sup>34</sup> Williamson, *Isaiah 6-12*, 109: “The coalition did not intend actually to fight at all but to achieve their goal through a major and overwhelming show of force ...”

<sup>35</sup> Jacqueline Grey, “Embodiment and the Prophetic Message in Isaiah’s Memoir,” *Pneuma* 39.4 (2017): 437, <https://doi.org/10.1163/15700747-03904018>; Matthijs J. De Jong, *Isaiah among the Ancient Near Eastern Prophets: A Comparative Study of the Earliest Stages of the Isaiah Tradition and the Neo-Assyrian Prophecies* (Supplements to Vetus Testamentum 117; Leiden: Brill, 2007), 57.

<sup>36</sup> Siddall, “Tiglath-Pileser III’s Aid to Ahaz,” 103.

<sup>37</sup> Stuart A. Irvine, *Isaiah, Ahaz, and the Syro-Ephraimite Crisis* (SBL Dissertation Series 123; Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1990), 2–3.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. also Esterhuizen, “A Study of the Tension between Despair and Hope,” 61.

<sup>39</sup> Erling Hammershaimb, “The Immanuel Sign,” *Studia Theologica - Nordic Journal of Theology* 3.2 (1949): 135, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00393384908599686>; Kay Weissflog, *Zeichen und Sinnbilder: die Kinder der Propheten Jesaja und Hosea, Arbeiten zur Bibel und ihrer Geschichte* 36 (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2011), 513.

As a result of this political crisis Isaiah not only gave verbal prophetic utterances to Ahaz and the people of Judah, but he also used sign-acts to emphasize his message to the people, as the “symbolic naming of a prophet’s child is also a form of sign-act”, given that a sign-act reinforces the divine message to an audience.<sup>40</sup> In Isaiah 7 and 8, the prophet uses children from inter alia his own family as signs.<sup>41</sup> It has already been mentioned that the parental identity of the “Immanuel” child is a matter of debate.

Although it may seem, at first glance, as if the children are background figures, the children and the significance of their names come to the fore when the texts are read in detail. In this regard, Parker<sup>42</sup> fittingly writes that “children help to shape the stories of the text, even when they play minor roles.” Three children appear in Isaiah 7 and 8: *Shear-jashub* (שָׁאֲרָיִשׁוּב), meaning “a remnant shall return” (Isaiah 7:3ff: “And the Lord said to Isaiah: ‘Go out to meet Ahaz, you and your son Shear-jasub’”), *Immanuel* (עִמָּנוּאֵל), “God with us” (Isaiah 7:14: “Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son and shall call him Immanuel”) and *Maher-shalal-hash-bas* (מָהֵר שָׁלַל הָשָׁבַז) meaning “the spoil speeds, the prey hastens” (Isaiah 8:1: “Then the Lord said to me, Take a large tablet and write on it in common characters, ‘For Maher-shalal-hash-baz’”).

These three sign-names accentuate YHWH’s message to the reluctant Judean audience, as these names indeed can be described as “visible evidence of the presence and purpose of God.”<sup>43</sup> The names function symbolically as signs and their function is to authenticate YHWH’s words to the Judean nation; that is to say, confirm that these words were from YHWH and directed to the people of Judah.<sup>44</sup> Although these names symbolise the word of YHWH to the nation, the children are much more than simply a name written on a tablet (or papyrus) to

<sup>40</sup> Jacqueline E. Lapsley, “Look! The Children and I Are as Signs and Portents in Israel’: Children in Isaiah,” in *The Child in the Bible* (ed. Marcia J Bunge, Terence E Fretheim, and Beverly R Gaventa; Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2008), 83. Cf. also Collins, “The Sign of Immanuel,” 226–38; Weissflog, *Zeichen und Sinnbilder*, 31–33; Paul D. Wegner, *An Examination of Kingship and Messianic Expectation in Isaiah 1-35* (Lewiston, NY: Mellen Biblical Press, 1992), 84–85; Hugh G M. Williamson, “The Messianic Texts in Isaiah 1-39,” in *King and Messiah in Israel and the Ancient Near East: Proceedings of the Oxford Old Testament Seminar* (ed. John Day; Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 270; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 253–54.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. Isa 8:18: “See, I and the children whom the LORD has given me are signs and portents in Israel from the LORD of hosts, who dwells on Mount Zion.”

<sup>42</sup> Julie F. Parker, *Valuable and Vulnerable: Children in the Hebrew Bible, Especially the Elisha Cycle* (Brown Judaic Studies 355; Providence, RI, 2013), 10.

<sup>43</sup> Bernhard W. Anderson, *Understanding the Old Testament* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.; Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1975), 65.

<sup>44</sup> Mark D. Schutzius II, *The Hebrew Word for “sign” and Its Impact on Isaiah 7:14* (Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2015), 121–24.

convey a message because YHWH's message encapsulates both a message of judgment and despair, as well as hope and resilience, and this message comes in the form of children.<sup>45</sup>

The events in Isaiah 7 and 8, therefore, create a dialectic construct, where the signs and symbols which are inherent within the names of the children permutate a plethora of trauma responses and experiences. Against this background, it is therefore understandable that these symbolic messages embedded in the names of the children can have a traumatic knock-on effect on the people, as it starts with an individual blow which ripples through the core of the community where even the social fibre of the community is put into question. The signs and symbols spark trauma responses that entrench the trauma in the scaffolds of the physical and psychological well-being of the individual and the collective society. Poser<sup>46</sup> postulates that even a "historical framework acquires meaning for identity." This framework within the sign-names of the children encircles the experiences of both the individual and the collective social group.

If we take the possible trauma implications of the sign-names of the children in chapters 7 and 8 into cognisance, then the affected within this historical scope would be King Ahaz, Isaiah and the people of Judah. Therefore, we can assume that the traumatic implications increase from the individual exposure to the collective experience of the collective group.

A comprehensive study of the three named children of Isaiah as found in Isaiah 7 and 8 provides us with the research opportunity to assess this specific name-giving text as pre-traumatic experiences and possible *generational imprinted trauma* because of the eminent and constant threat of war that was scourging their existence. This threat entailed the Syro-Ephraimite coalition as well as the Assyrian campaign where Judah was under the threat of beleaguering to become a vassal state for the Assyrians. In this regard Aster<sup>47</sup> justly infers as follows: "The connection between the Syro-Ephraimite threat and the threat of an impending Assyrian invasion, which lie in the background of Isa 7, are explicit in 8:5–8."

Up until now, our knowledge of migration is based on the post-exilic perspective, as references to migration are usually made after the fact. Pre-migration stressors personify anticipation, possible devastating events, survival

<sup>45</sup> Alec J. Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1993), 81–82; Esterhuizen, "A Study of the Tension between Despair and Hope," 154.

<sup>46</sup> Ruth Poser, "Embodied Memories: Gender-Specific Aspects of Prophecy as Trauma Literature," in *Prophecy and Gender in the Hebrew Bible* (ed. L Juliana M Claassens and Irmtraud Fischer; The Bible and Women. An Encyclopaedia of Exegesis and Cultural History 1.2; Atlanta, GA: SBL Press, 2021), 338.

<sup>47</sup> Shawn Z. Aster, *Reflections of Empire in Isaiah 1-39: Responses to Assyrian Ideology* (ANEM 19; Atlanta, GA: SBL Press, 2017), 106.

and adjustment.<sup>48</sup> The name-giving texts in Isaiah 7 and 8 are encumbered with images of looming migration and possible destruction. In the metaphorical layers of “what is not said,” the pre-migration stressors are screaming to be heard through the name-giving of the children. The metaphorical voices emblematically prophesy the relived experiences that form part of the *generational imprinted trauma*, but also through the relived sharing that creates a picture that offers glimmers of hope, resilience and restitution for the people of Judah, as the children embody hope rather than judgment. Within the nothingness lies the everything of resilience and salvation.

Reading prophetic literature with a sensitivity to the effects that trauma has on individuals and communities at large, Stulman & Kim<sup>49</sup> assert that biblical prophecy tries to find meaning in overwhelming suffering and to create a way for hope in trauma-stricken communities.

## 1 Shear-jashub (שָׁאֵר יָשׁוּב)

The historical drama referring to the three significant children’s names in Isaiah 7 and 8 contains all the elements of a real drama where there is a character, a plot, themes, and dialogue. With each reference the plot thickens making the text more complex and puzzling with metaphorical meaning. The first name of a child that we read about is *Shear-jashub* (שָׁאֵר יָשׁוּב – “a remnant shall return”). This child is physically present to embody the message from YHWH to the king and the nation. This child’s metaphorical name forms part of the prophetic practice of Isaiah 7 where the symbolism underlines the message and character of the passage. Scholars such as Watts,<sup>50</sup> as well as McEntire,<sup>51</sup> state the notion that the boy must have been old enough to go with his father, Isaiah, to meet King Ahaz.

The physical presence of *Shear-jashub* becomes a very loud silent witness to the prophecy through his name-bearing at this historical point. This charged moment of silent prophecy becomes even more resolved and tangible in the symbolic actions. Motyer<sup>52</sup> postulates that the name embodies sound as well as sight and, therefore, could infer trauma elements of disaster and war. Grammatically the name *Shear-jashub* is a short sentence and Irvine<sup>53</sup> explains that it consists of a subject, *Shear* (שָׁאֵר), and a predicate *jashub* (יָשׁוּב), where the first part of the name *Shear* stems from the Hebrew root שָׂאֵר, meaning “remain”

<sup>48</sup> Esterhuizen and Groenewald, “Towards a Theology of Migration,” 34–41.

<sup>49</sup> Louis Stulman and Hyun C P. Kim, *You Are My People: An Introduction to Prophetic Literature* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2010), 7.

<sup>50</sup> John D W Watts, *Isaiah 1-33* (Revised edition; WBC 24; Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2005), 91.

<sup>51</sup> Mark McEntire, *A Chorus of Prophetic Voices: Introducing the Prophetic Literature of Ancient Israel* (Louisville, KY: Presbyterian Publishing Corporation, 2015), 37.

<sup>52</sup> Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah*, 81.

<sup>53</sup> Irvine, *Isaiah, Ahaz, and the Syro-Ephraimitic Crisis*, 142.

or “left over” and in general this means “remnant,” and יָשׁוּב comes from the stem שׁוּב which generally means “to return, go back.”<sup>54</sup> It can also suggest a “turning back” to YHWH. According to Williamson<sup>55</sup> the verb can also be used in its military sense and would then mean “a return from battle” and the “survival in war.”

The historical plot of chapter 7 narrates a fearful king, Ahaz, who was shaking like a tree in the wind. Grey<sup>56</sup> writes that the name of *Shear-jashub* hypothesizes that a remnant will return, even if the tree is to be cut down to a stump, the promise that it will survive is evident in the remnant that is left. The metaphorical message that is given through the sign-name is that history will show that the threat from the north will not succeed but that they will be cut down. In this context, the name *Shear-jashub* embodies hope, comfort, and survival. The dichotomy in the name denotes that there is hope but that the nothingness of despair is also just a breath away.

The complexity embedded in the name also predicts the possibility of future exile if King Ahaz chooses not to trust in YHWH through his lack of faith (7:9). The hesitancy of the King topples the equipoise into a dystopia of great suffering and trauma turbulence. The prophetic message of the sign-name *Shear-jashub* also prophesies something of the character of YHWH, that even in the midst of suffering and disaster, He will not abandon His people. Irvine<sup>57</sup> cites that the dualistic meaning of the name could also imply further two possible dissimilar reasons namely, that the emphasis might suggest the smallest of the remnant as “only a remnant” or “a remnant” and secondly, as an alternative, it might intend an assertive meaning as “a remnant indeed” or less strongly “at least a remnant.” To synopsise Irvine’s<sup>58</sup> remarks, it suggests that the first and the second meanings are statements full of possible hope and resilience where the remnant repents and has faith and political survival is certain. The tone of the third and the fourth translations are intertwined with negativity and hopelessness. They, however, differ from one another based on their response, either as a faithful turning back to YHWH or as “political survival.”

The name *Shear-jashub* conveys a double implication pertaining to an appraising expression as well as a performative countenance. There are deluges of traumatic imagery in the name *Shear-jahub* in the text of Isaiah 7:2: “the heart of Ahaz and the heart of the people shook as the trees of the forest shake before the wind.” These metaphorical images paint a dramatic opening scene of fear,

<sup>54</sup> John T. Willis, “Symbolic Names and Theological Themes in the Book of Isaiah,” *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 23.1 (2001): 74–75, <https://doi.org/10.1163/187122001X00044>.

<sup>55</sup> Williamson, *Isaiah 6-12*, 121.

<sup>56</sup> Grey, “Embodiment and the Prophetic Message in Isaiah’s Memoir,” 439.

<sup>57</sup> Irvine, *Isaiah, Ahaz, and the Syro-Ephraimitic Crisis*, 144.

<sup>58</sup> Irvine, *Isaiah, Ahaz, and the Syro-Ephraimitic Crisis*, 144.

tension, and anxiety, highlighting the overwhelming trauma markers and propensities within the text. The threat of war and the possibility of an Assyrian invasion of Judah from the Northern borders elevates the trauma responses and experiences for all the role players concerned. The anxiety is palpable for King Ahaz, the people of Judah, but more so for the prophet Isaiah, who is anxious that the King would place his faith in Yahweh.

The name *Shear-jashub* holds a psychological stronghold for King Ahaz. The prophetic message in the name declares that a remnant shall return, but for the King in his struggle to grapple with the meaning, a trauma offset point will be a reaction of disbelief and disillusion of the concept. The individual trauma trigger point of the King encompasses inner turmoil and conflict with himself, the reliving of past generational imprinted trauma and thought paralyzes. Esterhuizen<sup>59</sup> is of the opinion that the symptoms of a re-experienced trauma as pre-migration markers (*generational imprinted trauma*)

...are the inability to make healthy choices and it is clearly visible in the choices that King Ahaz made in not trusting Yahweh but to place his fate in the hands of the Assyrians. King Ahaz's inability to choose faith has major ramifications for the people of Judah who will later experience the physical Assyrian threat of a looming war, and relentless exposure to the emotional stressors of fear and anxiety.

The name *Shear-jashub*, as an exemplar, holds a double meaning as a trauma marker and indicator because it promises within the sign-name fragments of hope and resilience. It also warns that despair will follow if the king displays a lack of faith in YHWH.<sup>60</sup> The whole impact of the name rests on the axes of faith even though despair lies embedded in the notion that only a remnant will return if King Ahaz turns to YHWH in faith.<sup>61</sup> The returning remnant will only be experienced at a later stage within the historical drama of Judah, therefore impacting generational imprinted trauma and prolonging the culminating trauma symptoms for the King, Isaiah, and the people of Judah.

The name as a trauma marker creates a spontaneous visual picture<sup>62</sup> and the young boy *Shear-jashub*, through his physical presence, visually embodied and portrayed the symbols of misery and hopefulness through his innocence. The

<sup>59</sup> Esterhuizen, "A Study of the Tension between Despair and Hope," 160.

<sup>60</sup> Paul D. Wegner, *Isaiah: An Introduction and Commentary* (Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries 20; Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2021), 105 infers in this regard as follows: "The child's name may be either a positive sign ('at least a remnant will return') or a negative one ('only a remnant will return'). The ambiguity could have been intentional and dependent on Ahaz's response".

<sup>61</sup> Esterhuizen, "A Study of the Tension between Despair and Hope," 160.

<sup>62</sup> John P. Wilson and Jacob D. Lindy, *Trauma, Culture, and Metaphor: Pathways of Transformation and Integration* (Routledge Psychosocial Stress Series 47; New York, NY: Routledge, 2013), 6.

intricacy of all these possible traumatic implications makes it possible to read the metaphorical name *Shear-jashub* through a lens of trauma and resilience.

## 2 Immanuel (עִמָּנוּ אֵל)

The Immanuel (עִמָּנוּ אֵל) name in Isaiah 7:14 is a very well-known passage in the Book of Isaiah, and many scholars have written an array of papers and commentaries about the meaning and interpretation of the name. For us, this specific sign-name is of extreme importance in the study of trauma and the symbolic trauma implications the name holds as part of the Isaiah prophecy and as an indicator of nothingness on the one hand and hope and resilience on the other. It is of interest to note that this name reference does not appear anywhere else in the Hebrew Bible, but Childs<sup>63</sup> writes in this regard that it has a close parallel with Psalm 46:8,12, which makes it clear that it is a close expression of trust in YHWH and the essential devotion he has towards Israel. The dramatic plot in Isaiah 7:10-16 narrates the traumatic facts that King Ahaz presents with symbolic deafness and blindness to the message contained in the sign-name of *Shear-jashub*. This obstinate attitude of King Ahaz does not deter the prophet, and Isaiah persists through his prophetic utterances that the King should "ask a sign from YHWH your God" (7:11).

According to Mortyer,<sup>64</sup> the sign is no longer a matter of invitation or a sign of hope but of prediction. It topples the scale and becomes a sign of judgment and despair, as it displays the displeasure YHWH has with this stubborn King as well as with the Judean people. There is another sentiment offered by Hibbard<sup>65</sup> which offers, in our opinion, a more ameliorate observation, namely that *Immanuel* as a sign-name is reused in Isaiah 8:8 and 8:10, where in both verses reference is made to "God with us." The verse in Isaiah 8:8, "it will sweep on into Judah as a flood, and, pouring over, it will reach up to the neck; and its outspread wings will fill the breadth of your land, O Immanuel," encompasses a threatening connection to the looming Assyrian invasion. This specific reference holds a glimmer of hope for Judah but an almost unenviable defeat for Samaria and Damascus. Chapter 8:10 reads: "Take counsel together, but it shall be brought to naught; speak a word, but it will not stand, for God is with us." The core message of this verse is to forewarn all the enemies that are threatening Judah that their wicked plans will not succeed against Jerusalem because "God is with us" (עִמָּנוּ אֵל).

<sup>63</sup> Childs, *Isaiah*, 66.

<sup>64</sup> Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah*, 84.

<sup>65</sup> Todd J. Hibbard, "From Name to Book: Another Look at the Composition of the Book of Isaiah with Special Reference to Isaiah 56-66," in *A Teacher for All Generations: Essays in Honor of James C. Vanderkam* (Vol. 1; ed. Eric F Mason et al.; Supplements to the Journal for the Study of Judaism 153/I; Leiden; Boston, MA: Brill, 2012), 138.

The child-sign of *Immanuel* was later taken up in the Gospel of Matthew, but Grey<sup>66</sup> makes a valid assumption that many scholars "miss the value and the importance" of this passage within the background of the Syro-Ephraimite crisis and the traumatic events to which it pertains. Within research circles, much speculation and debate are given to clarify the possible identity of the father and mother of the child *Immanuel*. Whereas many scholars are of the opinion that the first child (*Shear-jashub*) and the third child (*Maher-shalal-hash-bas*) are Isaiah's sons, the identity of the second child (*Immanuel*) has often been discussed, and there is no final conclusion in this regard (e.g. whether it was Isaiah's son or Ahaz's son – as two of the possible options mentioned).<sup>67</sup> Although Roberts<sup>68</sup> explains that Isaiah never openly recognized *Immanuel* as his son, as it was in the case with *Shear-jashub* and *Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz*, he is of the opinion that all three of these children with symbolic names were Isaiah's children. The text, however, does not indicate to us who the child's father or mother is, and in spite of this, the biological identity of the child is of lesser importance for the significance of the name which the child bears within the development of the narrative, as well as regarding the trauma indicators inherent in the name of this child. If the identity of the mother and child were important to the scribes, they would have made it known to the reader of this text.<sup>69</sup>

King Ahaz becomes the catalyst of the traumatic events to follow when he makes the fatal decision to place his trust in a precarious political scenario with a distrustful human king, rather than the steadfast promise of salvation that YHWH offers through the prophetic utterances of Isaiah.<sup>70</sup> This will eventually lead to the traumatic devastation of his household and the people of Judah (cf. the prediction in 8:5-10). The special imagery is used in a defined and precise

<sup>66</sup> Grey, "Embodiment and the Prophetic Message in Isaiah's Memoir," 442.

<sup>67</sup> Cf. inter alia Beuken, *Jesaja 1-12*, 203–5; Childs, *Isaiah*, 66; Collins, "The Sign of Immanuel," 231; Ronald E. Clements, "The Immanuel Prophecy of Isaiah 7:10-17 and Its Messianic Interpretation," in *Old Testament Prophecy: From Oracles to Canon* (ed. Ronald E. Clements; Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 70; Roberts, *First Isaiah*, 119; Jimmy J. M. Roberts, "Isaiah and His Children," in *Biblical and Related Studies Presented to Samuel Iwry* (ed. Scott Morschauer and Ann Kort; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1985), 193–203; Tull, *Isaiah 1-39*, 166; Hans Wildberger, *Isaiah 1-12* (trans. Thomas H. Trapp; CC; Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1991), 308–10; Williamson, *Isaiah 6-12*, 155–62.

<sup>68</sup> Roberts, *First Isaiah*, 107.

<sup>69</sup> Tull, *Isaiah 1-39*, 166.

<sup>70</sup> Wegner, *Isaiah*, 110 infers in this regard as follows: "The syntax of verse 17, which places the direct object as far as possible from the verb, highlights the dread that the coming of the Assyrian king should instill. Thus, Ahaz is warned that the very instrument he will call upon for protection will instead bring destruction."

way, and therefore, Motyer<sup>71</sup> writes, as already been stated, that the sign of the name *Immanuel* is no longer a persuasion to have faith anymore, but rather a prediction of a disaster that will befall Judah. It also underlines all that YHWH said to King Ahaz through the prophetic words of Isaiah – that this was the precipitant, where cause and effect collided, and the result would be divine retribution for this non-belief.

The metaphorical sign-name of *Immanuel* encapsulated trauma tendencies of destruction, fear, and possible death as an outcome of divine retribution for the people of Judah. The disillusionment and thought paralysis on the anticipation of loss of identity and becoming a vassal state must have triggered trauma responses of fear and anxiety in the minds of King Ahaz, Isaiah, and the Judean people. The stark reality of looming war and devastation created a trauma platform of fear as the prolonged exposure to these stressors impacted the social core and well-being of the people of Judah. A traumatic void is unfolding where nothingness, despair and disaster occur together in a paradoxical sphere of hope, somethingness, redemption and resilience, as is written in verses 14-16. Wilson & Landy<sup>72</sup> writes that trauma markers or indicators contain facets that portray values, beliefs, and a social way of living. To identify the trauma markers in the sign-name *Immanuel*, one needs to take the historical background of the time, as narrated in Isaiah 7, into consideration. It is set against the milieu and turmoil of the Syro-Ephraimite threat, and YHWH offers King Ahaz a sign to defeat the political threat.

The wonder of hope and resilience in the sign-name *Immanuel* reaches further than a promise to the individual but encompasses the nation of Judah as a whole. The promise in the name “God with us” pervades the social fibre and functional breadths of the community, rendering possible future hope and growth through resilience and endurance.

### 3 Maher-shalal-hash-baz (מַהֵר שָׁלַל חֵשׁ בָּז)

Chapter 8 tells the story of another child – a third child – who is present in the narrative which has commenced in chapter 7. Although the narrative style in chapter 8 differs from the style in chapter 7 (first-person versus third-person),<sup>73</sup> it is more important for our discussion that this child will also be a sign (אֵימָתָה) to the nation during the tumultuous times they are experiencing during the Syro-

<sup>71</sup> Alec J. Motyer, *Isaiah by the Day: A New Devotional Translation* (Rossshire, UK: Christian Focus Publications, 2011), 84.

<sup>72</sup> Wilson and Lindy, *Trauma, Culture, and Metaphor*, 6.

<sup>73</sup> Chapter 7 is written in the third-person style, and chapter 8 is written in the first-person narrative style in which chapter 6 was also written. This is, however, not the aim of this contribution to elaborate in more detail on the difference in style. Cf. Beuken, *Jesaja 1-12*, 214; Williamson, *Isaiah 6-12*, 208.

Ephraimite crisis.<sup>74</sup> In spite of the blindness and deafness of Ahaz and the Judean community (cf. 6:10), Isaiah persists in embodying his message to the king and the nation.<sup>75</sup> This third name, which is a child-sign, is indicated as *Maher-shalal-hash-baz* (מֵהָר שָׁלַל חֶשׁ בַּז), with the meaning of “speedy plunder, swift pillage” or “the spoil speeds, the pray hastens” (Isaiah 8:1-4). In the development of the narrative the prophet was instructed to write this name in large characters on a tablet (גְּלִיּוֹן),<sup>76</sup> and only afterwards the name had to be given as a metaphorical name to his son who was born to symbolise the sudden attack by the Assyrian army.<sup>77</sup>

Childs<sup>78</sup> infers that the sign is a form of symbolic action indicating that a prophecy of judgment will be fulfilled soon. In this instance (Isaiah 8), the symbolic name of the child *Maher-shalal-hash-baz* functions as the sign and is preceded by a symbolic inscription on a tablet of the name which is to be given to the child. The presence of the well-known and reliable witnesses in this narrative could be an indication that YHWH has already decided upon the judgment which will be executed, namely before the child could say his first words, the two coalition partners of Damascus and Samaria will be attacked. This attack does not necessarily imply their final defeat or destruction, as it is plausible to see the context of this narrative during the Syro-Ephraimite crisis, and as Williamson<sup>79</sup> infers, the “implications of the present verse of victory for the Assyrians without the necessary personal involvement of the king and of payments made to him seem reasonably to have been fulfilled, therefore.”

Grey<sup>80</sup> emphasises the following three aspects in this pericope, namely the instruction from YHWH (8:1), the fulfilment of the particular instruction by Isaiah (8:2-3a), and lastly the interpretation given by YHWH himself (8:3b-4). Each one of these aspects entails the sign-name of the child: the meaning of his name containing two comparable verbs, namely “quick; swift” and “spoil; plunder.” According to YHWH’s interpretation (8:4), the cities of Samaria and Damascus will be plundered by the Assyrians. The text thus unmistakably indicates who will fall victim to the Assyrians’ plundering.<sup>81</sup>

<sup>74</sup> Beuken, *Jesaja 1-12*, 219; Roberts, *First Isaiah*, 129; Gary V Smith, *Isaiah 1-39* (NAC 15A; Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 2007), 219; Williamson, *Isaiah 6-12*, 208.

<sup>75</sup> Grey, “Embodiment and the Prophetic Message in Isaiah’s Memoir,” 445.

<sup>76</sup> Tull, *Isaiah 1-39*, 179 infers that a גְּלִיּוֹן was translated in the ancient translations in varied ways, namely as a “papyrus sheet; tanned skin; tablet; book. While the NIV calls it a ‘large scroll,’ others have suggested it may be of clay, stone, or wood covered with wax.”

<sup>77</sup> Esterhuizen, “A Study of the Tension between Despair and Hope,” 156.

<sup>78</sup> Childs, *Isaiah*, 72.

<sup>79</sup> Williamson, *Isaiah 6-12*, 223.

<sup>80</sup> Grey, “Embodiment and the Prophetic Message in Isaiah’s Memoir,” 445–46.

<sup>81</sup> Esterhuizen, “A Study of the Tension between Despair and Hope,” 166.

According to Esterhuizen,<sup>82</sup> the name *Maher-shalal-hash-baz* implicates several trauma symptoms which were of particular concern to Judah and are therefore relevant for our discussion here. As the name indicates, the enemy will come swiftly and speedily, will leave behind devastation and plunder, and will depart with the spoils of war.<sup>83</sup> Although Isaiah announces judgment for Judah's enemies, there is not much reason to celebrate, as seen in the following section (8:5-8).<sup>84</sup> As a consequence of Assyria's attack on Samaria and Damascus, Judah's vulnerability will be exposed even more, and it indeed will become an easy target for a possible Assyrian threat.

The following section remembers the warning Isaiah gave to Judah not to celebrate the Assyrians as YHWH's instrument of liberation, but be warned that Judah, like Samaria and Damascus, will be punished by the Assyrians as well (cf. 10:5 – "the rod of my anger"). Once again we hear ominous language in this section, which is described in vivid poetic language, namely that the Assyrians will come like the "mighty flood waters of the River" (8:7). The flood waters of this mighty river (i.e. the Euphrates) will sweep over the country and as a consequence will leave it devastated. As is the case with a flood, the people will be overwhelmed when the Assyrians enter their land ("it will sweep on into Judah as a flood, and, pouring over, it will reach up to the neck; and its outspread wings will fill the breadth of your land, o Immanuel – Isa. 8:8).<sup>85</sup>

Continuous exposure to traumatic events heightens the whole trauma episode, as we have seen in these two chapters. The trauma events, such as war, devastation, threats, subsequent fears and anxiety, to which king Ahaz, the prophet Isaiah and the people of Judah have been exposed can cause emotional desensitisation where feelings of numbness<sup>86</sup> and hopelessness are present and have an effect on either the individual or the collective's emotional responses and rational behaviour or thinking.<sup>87</sup> According to O'Connor<sup>88</sup> the above is a normal defence mechanism that protects "people from feeling unbearable violence, hurt, and loss." If people lose all hope, it is as if they are in a state of shut-down, they are no longer alive in this world. This lack of emotional responsiveness is a coping mechanism in order to live through the trauma and to survive the trauma. Although the name *Maher-shalal-has-baz* would have

<sup>82</sup> Esterhuizen, "A Study of the Tension between Despair and Hope," 166.

<sup>83</sup> Joseph A. Everson, *The Vision of the Prophet Isaiah. Hope in a War-Wearied World – A Commentary* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2019), 39.

<sup>84</sup> Wildberger, *Isaiah 1-12*, 339.

<sup>85</sup> Everson, *The Vision of the Prophet Isaiah*, 39–40.

<sup>86</sup> Irene Visser, "Trauma and Power in Postcolonial Literary Studies," in *Contemporary Approaches in Literary Trauma Theory* (ed. Michelle Balaev; Hampshire, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 115.

<sup>87</sup> Esterhuizen, "A Study of the Tension between Despair and Hope," 166.

<sup>88</sup> Kathleen M. O'Connor, *Jeremiah: Pain and Promise* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2011), 25.

caused a sigh of relief for the current moment, it is not a neutral term and inherent in the name is the indication of a forthcoming threat to Judah as well. The trauma implications of “speedy plunder, swift pillage” would have caused numbness as they have been threatened for a prolonged period already.

In this narrative YHWH’s judgment and his displeasure with the king and the people are tangible. Because of their lack of faith, the nation is pushed into despair and nothingness, with apparently no hope of a new dawn at all. The question can rightfully be asked if any hope, in the midst of nothingness, is possible when we take the metaphorical meaning of the name *Maher-shalal-hash-baz* into consideration. Although the name may not indicate any immediate promise of salvation, it, on the other hand, provides the hope that in a few years, Samaria and Damascus would not be a threat to Judah anymore. The little flame of hope, burning in the midst of feelings of nothingness may be that Isaiah’s prophetic utterances indicate to the nation, and the reader of the narrative as well, the promise that “God is with us” (עִמָּנוּ – 8:8).<sup>89</sup>

## D CONCLUSION

The sign-names of the children in Isaiah 7 and 8 can leave the reader perplexed as the text narrates not only the metaphorical name meaning but provides numerous trauma nuances and opacity in reference to these names. The complexity of the metaphorical meaning of the names embodies the possible traumatic outcome that not only King Ahaz had to face but also forewarned the nation of Judah of their possible fate if they disobeyed YHWH. The names, in a way, included the traumatic consequences of the individual and the collective in a culminating manner.

The historical setting of Isaiah 7 and 8 sets the dramatic scene for tension, trauma, and threats. The major event that permutated the historical landscape of the time was the Syro-Ephraimite crisis that took place between 734 and 732 BC. A scenario of looming war and destruction was set, and the foreboding invasion by the Assyrians intensified the trauma levels to new heights for both the individual as well as the collective group. The relationship between King Ahaz and the prophet Isaiah came to the fore during the Syro-Ephraimite war where the possibility of war and suppression became a stark reality.

In Judean history, the text in Isaiah 7 and 8 became the everyday epoch of imminent war, suppression, constant fear, hopelessness, and loss. The reaction and behaviour of King Ahaz represented a King’s and a nation’s response to the oracles spoken by Isaiah. The king’s callous reactions reverberate the overall sense of nothingness and despair. However, hope and restoration for a king and a nation was found within the inner fibres of the sign-names of the children. Children, though they sometimes might be in the background in the Hebrew text,

<sup>89</sup> Esterhuizen, “A Study of the Tension between Despair and Hope,” 168.

do form an integral part of the prophetic message as attested in Isaiah 7 and 8. The symbolic sign-names not only embody the physical presence of these children but also emphasize that YHWH had a message for both king Ahaz and the nation of Judah. The names are not merely sign-acts but also symbols of despair and hope for the people of Judah. Faith and belief in YHWH would result in hope and restitution, but the lack of faith and trust would result in despair and suffering. The symbolism in the names exposed the trauma markers experienced by the king, the prophet, and the people of Judah as individuals but also as a collective group.

The prophecy of Isaiah cuts like a two-sided sword as it oscillates between prophecies of judgment and salvation. On the same continuum, these prophecies also signify messages of hope and despair that expose the possible tension and trauma tendencies within the layers of the text. The names of the children, *Shear-jashub*, *Immanuel* and *Maher-shalal-hash-baz*, give the scope to use text-correlated trauma markers as pre-migration trauma. This can then be read and understood as generational imprinted trauma, which is rooted in historical collective memories that draw the historical collective trauma into the imagined impending threat of reality. Out of the nothingness of despair, a profusion of the collective having everything is created. The names as signs embodied in the children became barometers for the hope and salvation that YHWH will have for Judah if they believe, and by extension, for all humankind.

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