The debatable identity in Isaiah 62:5

Introduction

The identity of Zion’s spouse is debatable in modern Bible translations. The most common reading is ‘your sons’ (Amplified Bible [AB], American Standard Version [ASV], Berean Study Bible [BSB], Catholic Public Domain Version [CPDV], Douay-Rheims Bible [DRB], English Standard Version [ESV], King James Version [KJV], New International Version [NIV], New American Standard Bible [NASB], Smith’s Literal Translation [SLT], World English Bible [WEB]). Secondly, the scholars reading preference is ‘your builder’, which refers to ‘God’ based on Psalms 147:2. This reading is adopted by Coverdale Bible of 1535, New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) and Good New Bible (GNT). Lastly, although the translation ‘builders’ is the least favourable reading, LSV and YLT use this reading. This research, therefore, attempts to argue for ‘your sons’ translation as the original reading through textual criticism as the methodology.

Methods and its findings: Textual criticism

External evidence

In this methodology, this research will present the reading from ancient sources such as Aleppo codex (eds. Elliger & Rudolph 1997), 1QIsa a (Parry & Qimron 1999), 1QIsa b (Ulrich, Flint & Abegg 1990), Peshitta (eds. Romeny & Van Peursen 1993), Targum (Chilton 1987), Septuagint (Ziegler 1939) and Vulgate (Kennicott 1776–1780; eds. Weber et al. 1983). The presentation of ancient readings is summarised in Table 1.

In addition to the primary reading on the text, this research will also incorporate the apparatuses of those ancient texts.
Aleppo Codex

Apparatus of Aleppo Codex does not list any witness that contains the reading of ‘your builders’ or ‘your builder’. Nevertheless, the editors of BHS propose another reading of ‘your sons’ (‘ניך’) – cf. Psalms 147:2.

1QIsa

There is no apparatus or no variant regarding the reading of ניך.

1QIsa

There is no apparatus or no variant regarding the reading of ניך.

Peshitta

There is no apparatus or no variant regarding the reading of ניך.

Targum

There is no apparatus or no variant regarding the reading of ניך.

Septuagint

There is no apparatus or no variant regarding the reading of οἱ υἱοί σου.

Vulgate

Both Kennicott and Weber reveal no variant regarding the reading of te filii.

In conclusion, the external evidence provides some information. Firstly, most of the ancient sources have ‘your sons’. Secondly, the translation of ‘your builders’ occurs because of the other possibility of translation of a pure consonantal text of ניך. Thirdly, the translation of ‘your builder’ or ‘בנך’ is certainly not attested in ancient texts. As a result, the external evidence favours the reading of ‘your sons’.

Internal evidence

The evaluation of ‘your builders’

This translation comes from another possibility of a pure consonantal text of ניך from the verb ניב or ‘בנך’ with holens – patah as its vowels. Although ניך offers two benefits: solves the incestuous sexual and ניב problem, this translation has a major problem. Isaiah 60:10 reveals the identity of this ‘builders’ as the servants of God’s people, and not husband. Isaiah 61:4–5 continue that this ‘builders’ will be God’s people vine dressers and farmers. Also, the lexical study demonstrates that 97.78% of a pure consonantal text ניך occurs as ‘your sons’ (Chia & Juanda 2019:8–13).

The evaluation of ‘your builder’

The major strength of this translation is solving the incestuous marriage in Isaiah 62:5 because Leviticus 18:7–8 prohibit this type of sexual relationship and Deuteronomy 27:23 curses the incestuous marriage. Also, Lowth (Lowth 1778:618–619), Duhm, Marti, Barthélemy (Barthélemy 1986:428–429; Duhm 1902:418; Marti 1900:389), McKenzie and Whybray (McKenzie 1968:185; Whybray 1990:389) endorse this translation through a parallelism argument. Table 2 is taken from McKenzie and Whybray.

This translation, nevertheless, has some challenges. Barthélemy argued that translators occasionally ignore a harder reading to advocate a reading obtained by a conjectural emendation (Barthélemy 2012:92). Thus, this reading might not be an original reading. Also, this research argues that Isaiah 62:5 should be read together with Isaiah 62:4 because these verses are presented in A-B-A-B structure. Isaiah 62:4a declares the result of Zion’s restoration, whilst Isaiah 62:4b–5 provides two reasons – emotional and marriage relationship – of Isaiah 62:4a.

Consequently, both McKenzie and Whybray mistakenly compare Isaiah 62:5a with 62:5b. In fact, Isaiah 62:4–5 symbolically picture the joyful and populous land of Zion through emotional and marriage relationship. Baker and Walton explain that this marriage picture the protection and providence of the land of Zion (Baker & Walton 2009:430).

The evaluation of ‘your sons’

This translation reads a pure consonantal text ניך from the noun נב or ‘בנן’ with qames – qames: as its vowels. Although this translation has an incestuous problem, it is supported by three major arguments. Firstly, Barthélemy argues that ancient scribes and translators tend to simplify the difficult text through lexical, grammatical and stylistic forms, which is called as ‘facilitating’. In other words, the harder text may be considered as the original (Barthélemy 2012:90). The reading of ‘your sons’ is definitely a more difficult reading because of the incestuous copulation. Secondly, God promises that his people will possess the land (Is 14:1; 49:20; 54:3; 60:4, 9, 21–22). Contextually, these people will benefit from their land as it is promised in Isaiah 62:9 (Chia & Juanda 2019:8–13).
Thirdly, the word בָּנָי appears nine times in the book of Isaiah (49:17, 22, 25; 51:20; 54:13 [two times]; 60:4, 9; 62:5). These verses refer בָּנָי as ‘your sons’. Therefore, it is plausible to think that Isaiah 62:5 follows the rest of the verses.

The next question, then, how are we going to solve an incestuous problem? There are two primary interpretations. The first interpretation is derived from Ephrem the Syrian. He interprets Christ as the husband and church as Zion such as in Ephesians 5:23 (ed. Lamy 1882–1902:2, 185). Eusebius of Caesarea also reads Isaiah 62:5 Christologically: the marriage between Christ and the church. He sees this marriage eschatologically. Christ will receive his bride and establish the holy church from the mature members of the former people and from the new people of the gentiles in the new age of the kingdom of Christ (ed. Elowsky 2013:301). The major problem with this interpretation is Isaiah 62:5 does not point out to Christ or the church. This text does not allow us to interpret the restoration of Zion spiritually.

The second interpretation is derived from the verb בֶּעָלֵךְ. The common meaning of בֶּעָלֵךְ is ‘to possess’. It is also related to ‘wife’ in Hebrew (Brown et al. 1952:127). Oswalt, the proponent of this translation, uses Judges 9:2 as its reference.1 He defends the translation of a dweller or possessor of the land more than a status as a husband. He also interprets the name of the land בֶּעָלֵךְ in Isaiah 65:4 as ‘belongs to’ or ‘to dwell with’ instead of ‘married’.2 He argues that ‘to dwell in’ is more sensible in the context than ‘married’. The reading of ‘your sons will dwell in you’ is more reasonable than ‘your sons will marry you’ because he believes that the relational aspect is important to Isaiah. It is not merely that the land will be re-inhabited, but that it will be in a relationship of belonging. This emphasis on relationship seems to be the reason of ‘to possess’ or ‘to dwell in’ reading (Oswalt 1998:579). Septuagint, Targum and Vulgate agree with Oswalt’s proposal, although Peshitta translates as ‘a sexual intercourse’ or ‘בְּנַכִּי’. Aleph pascal, QLSa and QLSb text could be translated either way: to dwell or to marry. Table 3 summarises ancient sources that concur Oswalt’s proposal.

The first major problem of this translation is the language of Isaiah 62:5a. It says, ‘for a young man בֶּעָלֵךְ a virgin’. If we translate בֶּעָלֵךְ as ‘to dwell in’ or ‘to possess’, then the emotional and marriage relationship would be disappeared from the reading. Also, it would be an inappropriate relationship if a young man possesses a virgin. On the other hand, it would be an inappropriate picture to imagine a young man dwells in a virgin. The second major problem is this translation ‘to dwell in’ or ‘to possess’ ignore the parallelism between Isaiah 62:4 and 62:5. The idea of these passages is to convey that Zion is not alone anymore: ‘תרביה’ and ‘שָׁפָקָה’. Therefore, the translation of ‘marry’ is more reasonable for both verse 4 and 5.

This research, therefore, attempts to propose another reading for this incestuous problem in Isaiah 62:5. I believe that בָּנָי or ‘your sons marry you’ should be read metaphorically. Why? Firstly, Isaiah 62:5 employs imagery to depict the joyful and populous Zion through emotional and marriage language: פִּיהַיִּא מִזְכָּרָה בִּנְכָּר הַנְּכָרִים מִזְכָּרָה אֲשֶׁר נָמָה נָמָה, יִתְּבֻּワンָיָה. This metaphor communicates that Zion will be filled with her inhabitants (Is 14:1; 49:20; 54:3; 60:4; 9, 21–22). The other scholars, such as Waard, Delitzsch, Beuken, support this interpretation (Beuken 1986–1989:229–230; Delitzsch 1889:592; Waard 1997:208). Therefore, the readers should understand ‘your sons marry you’ metaphorically. Secondly, the parallelism in Isaiah 62:5 itself. The exultation of the bridegroom over a bride is compared with God’s rejoice over Zion and the marriage of a young man with a young woman, therefore, should be compared with the marriage of Zion with your sons.

**Conclusion**

The debatable identity in Isaiah 62:5 has been examined in this article. Textual criticism, external evidence, supports the translation of ‘your sons’ because most of ancient sources contain that reading. The internal evidence also favours this reading. The examination from parallelism in Isaiah 62:4–5, a lexical study of בָּנָי, and a contextual endorse the reading of ‘your sons’. Nevertheless, the reading of ‘your sons’ provides an incestuous sexual problem. This research, therefore, proposes that בָּנָי should be read figuratively to picture the joyful and populous Zion through emotional and marriage relationship. The implication of this research is to ensure God’s protection and blessings upon his desolated and lost people.

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