

# HOW UNIVERSAL IS A MESSAGE? A THEOLOGICAL AND PHILOSOPHICAL PERSPECTIVE

## THE THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE OF THE EXILIC AND POSTEXILIC HEBREW UNIVERSALISM IN THE BOOK OF PROPHET ISAIAH<sup>♦</sup>

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**Abstract:** The present study aims to present the main features of the Hebrew universalism, as they can be extracted from the Old Testament book of prophet Isaiah. Although in the modern and contemporary scholarship it is agreed that Isaiah's book displays three different layers of redaction, set in pre-exilic, exilic and postexilic times, the universalist perspective is a common characteristic to all the constitutive parts. The main aspects of this perspective are the identification of Yahweh with the God of all the earth and the understanding of Israel's role as a witness and preacher of God's revelation to the nations.

**Keywords:** universalism, Isaiah, exile, Judaism

The Babylonian exile had a very serious influence on the religious and political mentality of the Israelite people. On one hand, Israel had to renounce to many of its political ambitions, but on the other hand, the Exile offered the appropriate framework to a powerful ideological and religious revival. In this context, there can be distinguished two main directions of interpreting the relation between the chosen people and Yahweh and its role in the life of the entire humanity. The first direction is nationalist one, and its greatest representative is the prophet Ezekiel, while the second is the universalist one, developed especially in the book

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of prophet Isaiah<sup>1</sup>. As far as Ezekiel's book is concerned, there are no doubts on its authorship, but in Isaiah's case the problem is somewhat complicated. Prophet Isaiah lived in the 8th century B.C. and in the beginning of the 7th century, so the material contained in chapters 40-66 of his book cannot be accepted as his own redaction, as it presents specific elements to the exilic and postexilic Judaism. Under these circumstances, the researchers separated this material from the rest of the book and further divided it into Second (or Deutero) Isaiah (chapters 40-55) and Third (or Trito) Isaiah (chapter 56-66). In general, though, it is admitted that the book of prophet Isaiah, as a whole, presents some very important elements of the Hebrew universalism, representing a true turning point in a mentality previously dominated by the strictest nationalism. The universalist perspective in the book of Isaiah is a profoundly theological one, being based on the consolidation of Israel's intimate relation with Yahweh and on the assumption by the chosen people of its role as a mediator or even as an active preacher of the divine word.

### **The book of prophet Isaiah**

Isaiah<sup>2</sup> is widely considered to be one of the greatest Hebrew prophets. He lived and prophesied in the eighth century B.C., in a very turbulent period for the kingdom of Judah. Most of the information concerning Isaiah is to be drawn from the biblical book ascribed to him. We know that he was the son of Amos (to be distinguished from the homonymous prophet) and, according to the Hebrew tradition, he was of royal blood. Some researchers even advanced the opinion that he was king Amaziah's brother. Isaiah grew up in Judah's capital, Jerusalem, and received a very solid education. This, along with his sociability and ability to decipher people's thoughts and intentions promoted him in a very important position, as a religious and political counselor of some Judean kings. Actually, it appears that Isaiah was also the official historiographer during the reigns of Uzziah (2 Chr. 26:32) and Hezekiah (2 Chr. 32:32), a position in which his contacts with the monarchs and the royal elites were frequent and stable. Despite his important offices, Isaiah had the appearance and character of a pure prophet. He preferred

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<sup>1</sup> H. Wheeler Robinson, *The Religious Ideas of the Old Testament*, Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1913, p. 14.

<sup>2</sup> In biblical Hebrew *yeshayahu*, meaning "the salvation of Yahweh" (Wilhelm Gesenius, Samuel Prideaux Tregelles, *Gesenius' Hebrew and Chaldee Lexicon to the Old Testament Scriptures*, Logos Research Systems, Bellingham, 2003, p. 374).

to wear very simple clothes and sandals, contrasting with his entourage, and he even went barefoot for a couple of years, fulfilling a divine commandment (Is. 20:2-6). Concerning his character, we could say that Isaiah displayed the most profound verticality, criticizing both the kings and the members of the higher class. He asked from the political elites for responsibility, seriousness and care for the people, while asking all to obey to God's words. In theological matters, Isaiah was very preoccupied, like all the prophets, in maintaining Judah's right beliefs about God and in denouncing the pagan practices. He also had harsh words on the formalism and lack of sincerity displayed by the ceremonies and rituals of his own religion: "And the Lord said: 'Because this people draw near with their mouth and honor me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me'" (Is. 29:13)<sup>3</sup>.

In point of international context, the first years of Isaiah's times were quite peaceful for both Judah and Israel. This was due to the weakness of the Aramaean kingdom and to the non-interventionist policy of the Assyrian kings. The turbulences began with the reign of Tiglath-Pileser III (747-727 B.C.) in Assyria. Against his increasing power, king Pekah of Israel formed a coalition together with the kingdom of Damascus (Aram), but found it very difficult to cooperate with his Israelite counterpart in Judah, king Ahaz, who refused to join the alliance. As a result, Judah entered a political turmoil, because Pekah and his ally tried to place a more favorable king on the throne of Judah, while Ahaz asked for Assyrian help. In 732 B.C., the Assyrians, under the command of Tiglath-Pileser III conquered Damascus and the northern parts of Israel, while transforming the rest of the country into a vassal state, governed by king Hoshea. But the atmosphere in Israel was still tensioned, so in the following years Hoshea prepared and started a rebellion against the foreign rule. The successor of Tiglath-Pileser III, king Shalmaneser V (727-722 B.C.) attacked Israel, but he died before capturing the capital of Israel, Samaria. Sargon II (722-705 B.C.) conquered the city and took a large mass of captives (27.900, according to the Assyrian archives), distributing them in Halah, Gozan and Media (2 Kgs. 17:6). The southern kingdom of Judah, which was a satellite state of Assyria, after the episode involving king Ahaz and the Assyrian ruler Tiglath-Pileser III, started to revolt against the foreign domination in the end of the eighth century B.C. As a punishment for their rebellious attitude, king Sennacherib (70-681 B.C.) launched an expedition in Judah

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<sup>3</sup> Walter A. Elwell, Barry J. Beitzel, *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible*, Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, 1988, p. 1046.

and besieged Jerusalem in 701 B.C., without success<sup>4</sup>. The first part of the book of prophet Isaiah (chapters 1-39) covers the period between the prophetic calling of Isaiah (in the year that king Uzziah died; Is. 6:1) and the last years of Hezekiah's reign (the eighties of the seventh century) and it is considered, by the vast majority of scholars – beginning with the 11th century Hebrew rabbi Ibn Ezra -, as the only portion of the book written by Isaiah himself<sup>5</sup>.

Despite this widely spread opinion, that the prophet Isaiah is the author of just part of the book, there are a lot of scholars nowadays who support the idea of the unity of the book, although they accept that the author or authors of Deutero-Isaiah cannot be identified with the historical prophet. One of these scholars, J. Alec Motyer, asserts that we are dealing with an Isaiah school, which collected the sayings and prophecies of Isaiah. He strongly believes that the main reason that led the nineteenth century scholars to deny the unity of the book is their rationalistic opposition to predictive prophecy. We know that chapters 40-55 of Isaiah's book present a very accurate image of the Babylonian exiles, while chapters 56-66 suggest a postexilic setting. In the traditional Christian theology, the predictive prophecy is very common and its accuracy is a sign of authenticity; such is the case of Isaiah predicting Cyrus by name (Is. 44:28). On the contrary, the rationalistic exegetes considered this exact prediction a sign of later redaction, sticking to their hermeneutic principles<sup>6</sup>. J. Alec Motyer is right to denounce this approach, but we cannot ignore the fact that "all literature is to a large extent a reflection of the period in which it was written, and has been influenced by the circumstances in which the authors lived"<sup>7</sup>. Even if we accept that a first redaction of the entire book belongs to Isaiah himself, we are forced to acknowledge that many key concepts contained in chapters 40-66 belong to exilic and postexilic interventions.

In modern scholarship, there is a debate whether we should speak only about a Second Isaiah (chapters 40-66), or about a Second (chapters 40-55) and Third Isaiah (chapters 56-66). The first opinion is still maintained by the majority of biblical scholars, but an increasing number

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<sup>4</sup> D.R.W. Wood, Howard Marshall, *New Bible Dictionary*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., InterVarsity Press, Leicester, 1996, p. 512.

<sup>5</sup> David Noel Freedman, Allen C. Myers, Astrid B. Beck, *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*, W.B. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 2000, p. 648.

<sup>6</sup> J. Alec Motyer, *Isaiah: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries 20, InterVarsity Press, Nottingham, 1999, pp. 34-36.

<sup>7</sup> R. N. Whybray, *The Second Isaiah*, T&T Clark, London & New York, 1995, p. 2.

of exegetes plead for the existence of a third unit in Isaiah's book, based mainly on the historic events. In 605 B.C., king Nebuchadnezzar of the Neo-Babylonian dynasty defeated Pharaoh Necho in Carchemish, in a decisive battle for the fate of the Middle East and became the most important leader in the world. After this victory, Nebuchadnezzar advanced southwards and he subjugated all the territories in the region. A first carrying away of captives from Jerusalem to Babylon occurred in August 605 B.C. and was followed by a second one in 597 B.C., when king Jehoiakim of Judah refused to pay the tribute to Babylon. Some ten years later, Zedekiah of Judah upset Nebuchadnezzar by negotiating treaties with Egypt and the Babylonian king invaded again the country, taking captives. Finally, the fourth deportation occurred during the attack of Nebuchadnezzar on Egypt, in 582 B.C., raising the total number of Judeans deported in Babylon to nearly 70.000 people<sup>8</sup>. Second Isaiah is most probably set some years after this final deportation, but before Cyrus issued the edict allowing the Jews to return to their homeland, in 538 B.C. In the exile, the social and political elite of Judah enjoyed a very limited autonomy, but managed to keep their national and religious identity<sup>9</sup>. The struggle to preserve the monotheistic religion and the intimate character of the relation between Jews and God combined with the international evolutions and the raise of the Persian power as a rival to Babylon created a favorable context for the development of a universalist perspective in the Hebrew thought.

### **The Holy One of Israel – God of all the earth**

The universalist perspective of Second and Third Isaiah is a theological one. Although the social and political frameworks played an important role in the general atmosphere of the exilic and postexilic times, the universalism developed in the midst of the Hebrew thought had at its base the strictest monotheism. In the Ancient Near East, the universalism was mainly a consequence of the expansionist policy of the great states in the region. Egypt, Assyria and Babylon were the most important powers and each had their own period of hegemony. But, because of their polytheistic backgrounds, these countries were not able to develop a religious universalism in the full sense of the expression. It is true that in the ancient past, the Sumerian god Ninurta demanded to be worshipped by all the captives taken from defeated countries and that

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<sup>8</sup> Walter A. Elwell, Barry J. Beitzel, *Baker Encyclopedia*, p. 734.

<sup>9</sup> Paul J. Achtemeier, *Harpers's Bible Dictionary*, Harper & Row, San Francisco, 1985, p. 430.

many of the gods of the conquerors entered the pantheon of their former enemies<sup>10</sup>, but this doesn't mean that we can identify a universalist ideology. The religious expansionism in the Ancient Near East involved only adding a foreign god to the local pantheon, without removing the old gods. Actually, this is what happened to all the ancient civilizations. None of them managed to remain untouched by the religious influences from abroad. But what is specific to the Hebrew religion is, of course, its monotheism. Moreover, in the Hebrew thought, this monotheism was a very particular one, because it involved a very intimate relation between God and His chosen people. Fighting against the armies and the religions of the neighboring countries, the Israelites, through the mouth of their prophets, proclaimed the total superiority of their God over the foreign gods. But still, this was not universalism, because God's message was directed only towards the children of Israel, in order to help them overcome the difficulties. In the book of prophet Isaiah, especially in the second part – the so-called Second Isaiah or Deutero-Isaiah – we can identify the first sensible traces of a reorientation of the Hebrew thought towards a theological universalist perspective. God is called "The Holy One of Israel", but He is also portrayed as the "God of all the earth". The special relation of Israel with God is seen not only as a privilege for the chosen people, but also as position from which Israel is called to spread the divine word into the entire world, either as an active missionary or as a passive witness. These two key concepts – the identification of the national God with the universal God and the mission to the nations (*goyim*) – are the main aspects of the universalist perspective of the exilic and postexilic Judaism.

The expression "the Holy One of Israel" is one of the divine names used in the Old Testament. This name is, actually, characteristic to the Hebrew religious tradition. It cannot be found in any other Semitic tradition, although one can identify some old Canaanite expressions which include terms used to describe holiness<sup>11</sup>. The oldest Old Testament passage where Yahweh is called "Holy" is 1 Sam. 6:20. The text says that seventy people were struck down by God, because they had dared to look into the Ark of God. Commenting the scene, the other inhabitants of Beth-Shemesh, the town where these things had happened,

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<sup>10</sup> Marjo C. A. Korpel, "The Greek Islands and Pontus in the Hebrew Bible", in *Old Testament Essays*, no. 19/1 (2006), p. 105.

<sup>11</sup> Like "bn qdsh", used in the Canaanite religion as a synonym for "il". Other constructions like "etzpn wqdsh" or "qdsh (w)amrr" are also used.

concluded, in a rhetorical language: “Who can stand before the Lord, before this Holy God?”.

The concept of holiness designates the very essence of the sacred and the absolute lack of any kind of impurity. The Semitic root “qds” implies, first of all, the idea of separation, of distinction and absolute otherness. In the early ages of the Semitic language family, the root gave birth to two main, basic forms – “qadish” and “qadosh”, while later, the Aramaic equivalent was established as “qedasha”<sup>12</sup>. The inspired authors of the Old Testament books present God only as Holy *par excellence*. He is separated by an infinite distance from everything else and, compared to Him, all the other things and persons are defined as common, unclean or profane (see Is. 40:25). Despite all these analogies and comparisons, we cannot explain in detail the exact meaning of holiness, because humans, as created beings, are unable to directly experiment it through their senses or to get a clear and distinct idea on the concept. The only way in which the divine holiness becomes accessible to the human experience is through its historic manifestation. The intimate relation between the Holy God and His chosen people, Israel, offered the adequate framework for this partial communication of holiness. Although God remained distant by nature – and His holiness continued to express an ineffable mystery and a consequence of the strictest monotheism – He came to be portrayed as the “The Holy One of Israel”.

This expression is used 26 times in the book of prophet Isaiah and only 6 times elsewhere in the Old Testament<sup>13</sup>, making it Isaiah’s favorite divine name. Given the special covenantal relation mentioned above, in chapters 40-55 Isaiah presents the Holy One of Israel as a Redeemer who will set free all the exiles from Babylon. The passage where Yahweh is portrayed as national God in the highest degree is, very likely, Is. 43:14-15. Firstly, the text identifies the Redeemer with the Holy One of Israel, and then it emphasizes the fact that the Redeemer will deliver the children of Israel, while bringing down all the Babylonians as fugitives. Addressing Israel, God says about Himself: “I am the Lord, your Holy One, Israel’s Creator, your King” (Is. 43:15). This phrase includes one of the clearest and most explicit definitions of the Hebrew national God, but, as we shall see, a real progress concerning

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<sup>12</sup> Francis Brown, Samuel Rolles Driver, Charles Augustus Briggs, *Enhanced Brown-Driver-Biggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*, Logos Research Systems, Oak Harbor, 2000, p. 871.

<sup>13</sup> Kendell H. Easley, *Holman QuickSource Guide to Understanding the Bible*, Holman Bible Publishers, Nashville, 2002, p. 146.

this understanding of God is present later on in Isaiah's book. Is. 54:4 represents a true turning point in the Hebrew religious and political thought, as Yahweh, a divine entity previously considered as a national God, superior to all the other gods of the nations, is proclaimed as a universal God: "the Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer; He is called the God of all the earth". This identification of Israel's God with the God of all the earth represents, in fact, an active remembrance of the universal character of the divine jurisdiction. This character was emphasized in the Noachic covenant, made by God with Noah, as a representative of the entire humanity, after the Flood. According to the covenant, Noah received the control over the entire creation. Humans, though, did not observe the covenant, and the consequence of their transgression is described by Isaiah in the terms of a universal judgment: "The earth will be completely laid waste and totally plundered" (Is. 24:3)<sup>14</sup>.

Thus, in the book of prophet Isaiah we witness a reevaluation of the universalist perspective enounced in the Pentateuch. In the context of a very difficult period for the children of Israel, who were forced to wander in a foreign land, but who finally managed to return, in part, to their homeland, the Hebrew thought goes to its premises, and it begins to reaffirm Yahweh's role as a universal God. This theological revival is very easily to observe in Second and Third Isaiah and this is an important argument for those who maintain the distinction between the text actually written by the prophet and the chapters added in exilic and postexilic times. In the previous centuries, both prophets and political leaders had struggled to prove Yahweh's superiority over the gods of the neighboring countries, but the perspective in Isaiah shows a remarkable maturity. The emphasis is now on the unity and uniqueness of God and on the fact that, no matter their attitudes and idolatrous religious practices, all the nations are under His power. In consequence, we may assert that the universalism proclaimed by the exilic and postexilic Hebrew theology, as proved by the book ascribed to prophet Isaiah, is, in fact, a strong consolidation of the monotheism. The national God of Israel, with which Israel has a special and specific relation, becomes "the One", the almighty God of all the earth. Although the nations do not know him yet (or at least not all the nations), everything they do is possible only because God allows them to act. Sooner or later, they will all know God,

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<sup>14</sup> Se-Hoon Jang, *Particularism and Universalism in the Book of Isaiah*, Peter Lang, Bern, 2005, p. 128.



and, according to the book of prophet Isaiah, Israel has the mission to spread His word to the nations<sup>15</sup>.

### **The Role of Israel in Spreading God's Message**

The debate concerning the presence of universalist perspectives in the books of the Old Testament prophets has been present in the biblical studies since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. As we have seen, H. Wheeler Robinson emphasized the ideological clash between nationalism and universalism in the exilic and postexilic Hebrew thought and, on his footsteps, the biblical scholars underlined the strong contrast between Isaiah's universalist tendencies and Ezekiel's fundamentally nationalist vision. Of course, between these two distant poles, the discussion can have a lot of nuances, because, as we will be able to observe from the short analysis of Second Isaiah, there are multiple ambiguities and *loci* of tension in the prophetic passages that seem to support one of the two radical perspectives. Things are even more complicated by the terminology the researchers used and still use to present the problems raised by Second and Third Isaiah. Thus, as far as Israel's mission to the nations is concerned, the concept of "universalism" received different definitions. It could imply, on one hand, an active participation of the chosen people in the process of preaching God's word to the gentiles, while, on the other hand, it could imply just a passive role of Israel, who stands as a testimony of God's existence and sovereignty, provoking a crisis of religious conscience to the nations. This crisis would lead them to recognize, accept and worship God the One, which is Yahweh. In general, though, no matter the side they prefer, modern scholars consider that the book of prophet Isaiah offers the premises of a universal salvation<sup>16</sup>.

The classic and modern exegesis on Second Isaiah recognized a universalist perspective centered on the concept of mission, of active preaching of the divine word by Israel to all the nations in the world. Even in the New Testament we see how passages from the second part of the book of prophet Isaiah are used to illustrate the missionary role of the chosen people. Saint Apostle Paul, addressing the Jews in Antioch in Pisidia, quotes God's words from Is. 49:16: "I have made you a light for

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<sup>15</sup> Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *An Introduction to the Theology of Religions*, InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, 2003, pp. 39-40

<sup>16</sup> Millard Erickson, "The State of the Question," in W. V. Crockett and J. G. Sigountos (eds.), *Through No Fault of Their Own? The Fate of Those Who Have Never Heard*, Baker, Grand Rapids, 1991, pp. 32-33.

the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth” (Acts 13:47). In the following centuries, this interpretation of the book of Isaiah dominated the Christian exegesis and the prophet – or, better said, the author of Deutero-Isaiah – was considered a true opener of the way for the Hebrew missionarism<sup>17</sup>. From the theological point of view, the interpretation in a missionary key of the exilic and postexilic universalism was based on the identification of Yahweh, the national God of Israel, as God the One, the God of the entire world. The process through which the prophet carries out the transition from this identification to the affirmation of the missionary duty of the children of Israel is a subtle one, involving deductions, rather than direct declarations. In a first stage, Israel will be the medium for Yahweh to make His holiness present and known to the nations, and that is why the chosen people is called “the light of the nations” (Is. 51:4). Then, all these nations will bow before Israel, but not as a consequence of a violent conquest, of a war, or of an ideological domination, but due to the intimate relation between it and the true God (Is. 49:22-23). Therefore, Israel is portrayed as a world teacher, which has to deliver the law and the worship of Yahweh to all the peoples<sup>18</sup>.

Bernard Wodecki, one of the most important contemporary researchers interested in the Hebrew universalism, pleads for a content unity of the book of prophet Isaiah, even though the controversies concerning its authorship cannot be overlooked. He considers that the entire book is penetrated by a universalist perspective and that the ideas acquire a more marked outline a greater theological depth in Second Isaiah. In chapter 1-39, the emphasis is on Zion, as a cosmic center of the world, where the nations will come as pilgrims. First of all, Jerusalem, and particularly Mount Zion, is seen as a safe haven for God’s people, but its vocation is universal, as it will not become a political capital of a certain state, but a place where the divine authority on all the nations will be present. Jerusalem will overcome the status of a material place, of a determinate space, and will affirm itself as a New Paradise, where the entire humanity will be in a direct and intimate relation with God<sup>19</sup>. In Second Isaiah, Israel’s role begins to be a more active one, through the Servant of God, who is identified by Wodecki with the Messiah, a classic

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<sup>17</sup> Edmond Jacob, *Theology of the Old Testament*, trans. A. W. Heathcote, P. J. Allcock, Harper and Row, New York, 1958, p. 220.

<sup>18</sup> John L. McKenzie, *Second Isaiah: Introduction, Translation and Notes*, The Anchor Yale Bible, Yale University Press, New Haven & London, 2008, p. lvii.

<sup>19</sup> Se-Hoon Jang, *Particularism*, p. 180.

identification in the Christian thought. Messiah will spread the teaching and the Law in the entire world, so Israel's collective missionary duty is to be considered quite limited. The most important results will be attained in the messianic age – that is, for Christians, in all these centuries that followed Jesus' earthly activity<sup>20</sup>.

After 1950, though, some scholars expressed the opinion that nationalism is, actually, the center of the prophetic discourse in Second Isaiah and that the universalist accents should be viewed as secondary elements. Most of the authors who opt to see Isaiah as a mainly nationalistic prophet, consider that the universal perspective in the exilic and postexilic Hebrew thought concerns, first and foremost, the divine plan in itself. In other words, universalism is a dimension of the providence, rather than an historic manifestation of Israel. Therefore, it could not be maintained the necessity of a missionary work on the part of the chosen people<sup>21</sup>. In this context, Israel's role in the universalist equation is that of simply being the chosen people. Israel acts exclusively as passive mediator by its very existence, as a medium of Yahweh revelation to the nations<sup>22</sup>. But, as we've previously pointed out, there are some visible fluctuations in Isaiah's prophetic message, which seems to oscillate between a nationalist perspective and a universalist one. For most of the contemporary exegetes, these fluctuations are due to the specific historic circumstances in which each of the three parts of the book was written. Because of the political instability in exilic and postexilic times, the members of the so-called "School of prophet Isaiah" reinterpreted the old traditions in a manner more appropriate to the new national and world configuration.

It is, however, possible to consider that the redactors of Deutero-Isaiah assumed the mainly nationalist material in the Isaiah original tradition. Because of the strong roots that nationalism had in the Hebrew mentality, they were not able to fully remove it from their redaction<sup>23</sup>. In this context, the book of Isaiah, as a whole, managed to exploit the

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<sup>20</sup> Bernard Wodecki, "Heiluniversalismus im Buch des Propheten Jesaja", in J. Reindl, G. Hentschel (eds.), *Dein Wort Beachten: Alttestamentliche Aufsätze*, St. Benno-Verlag, Leipzig, 1981, p. 99.

<sup>21</sup> Robert Martin-Achard, *A Light to the Nations: A Study of the Old Testament Conception of Israel's Mission to the World*, trans. J. P. Smith, Oliver and Boyd, London, 1962, p. 3.

<sup>22</sup> Michael A. Grisanti, "Israel's Mission to the Nations in Isaiah 40-55: An Update", in *The Master's Seminary Journal*, no. 9/1 (1988), p. 54.

<sup>23</sup> A. Gelston, "The Missionary Message of Second Isaiah", in *Scottish Journal of Theology*, no. 18 (1965), p. 316.

nationalist grounds by calling the Israelites to renew their covenantal relation with God and to reaffirm their status as Yahweh's privileged people. This normalization in the link between the children of Israel and their God was a prerequisite for the understanding of the central role that Israel is called to play in the plan of the expansion of the divine word. Thus, the historic evolution determined Israel to go through two very important stages: the first consisting in the consolidation of its character as the chosen people and its return full of love and obedience to Yahweh, and the second consisting in its universalist opening, as a witness and/or as a preacher of the existence and authority of God the One. Other researchers tried to redefine the terms of Isaiah's discourse, in order to explain the fluctuations between nationalism and universalism, but such an approach seems to adapt the prophetic content to the outer realities, rather than to explain Isaiah's vision in the given historic context<sup>24</sup>.

### **Conclusions**

As we have seen, the details of the universalist perspective present throughout the book of prophet Isaiah are still a question of debate in the academic world. But what we can assert with certitude is the fact that the exilic and postexilic age of the Hebrew history is dominated by an evident widening of the religious and political horizon. This universalism has its roots in the time of Isaiah himself, because in the first 39 chapters of its book, which are for sure his work, we can find a theological understanding of the fact that Yahweh, the national God so closely attached to the children of Israel, is, in fact, the One and Only God of the entire creation. Although this belief was, actually, fundamental in the Hebrew Bible (as proved by the Genesis), it was necessary to be reaffirmed in Isaiah's times and in the exilic and postexilic age. The Israelites had to understand that the salvation is not guaranteed by the ethnic origin, but by the degree in which the divine commandments are observed. As a consequence of the Exile, Deutero-Isaiah asked Israel to start to assume its role as a chosen people in the right manner, not as a matter of narcissistic pride, but as an obligation to act as witness and preacher – more or less active – of God's revelation to the nations.

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<sup>24</sup> D. E. Hollenberg, "Nationalism and 'the Nations' in Isaiah XL–LV", in *Vetus Testamentum*, no. 19 (1969), pp. 26-29.