Tzedek, Tzedek Tirdof: Poetry, Prophecy, and Justice in Hebrew Scripture

*Essays in Honor of Francis Landy
on the Occasion of his 70th Birthday*

Edited by

Andrew Gow
Peter Sabo

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Isaiah 1-12: Presentation of a (Davidic?) Politics

Ian D. Wilson

Perhaps obvious, the inspiration for this essay's title – and the point of departure for my thinking about the book of Isaiah on this particular occasion – is Peter Ackroyd's now classic work "Isaiah I–XII: Presentation of a Prophet."¹ Ackroyd, beginning his study with a brief overview of the many problems related to the book's composition, proceeds to ask: "Why is there so substantial a book associated with the prophet Isaiah?"² His answer is multifaceted. First, he argues, Isaiah was remembered as a crucial player in Jerusalem's survival before Assyria and, related, as a trustworthy predictor of the city's downfall before Babylon (Isa 36-39; cf. 2 Kgs 18-20), which placed him in a particularly prominent position in Judean memory. Second, drawing on the early work of Robert Carroll on cognitive dissonance and prophetic literature,³ Ackroyd emphasizes the import of Yahweh's paradoxical and deconstructive mission for the prophet, as stated in Isaiah 6:9-13. Why have promises of salvation not come to pass? Because the prophet's task in the first place was to preach such that he was not understood. This kind of message would enable extensive rereading and reinterpretation of prophetic texts, resulting eventually in a book like Isaiah. Third, and most important, Ackroyd shows in detail how chs. 1-12 – a unit that is clearly demarcated in the book – present the prophet as an "authoritative spokesman."⁴ These chapters strategically emphasize the past fall *and* future rise of Jerusalem and its human leadership, doing so with a

1 See pp. 16–48 in *Congress Volume: Göttingen, 1977*, VTSup 29 (Leiden: Brill, 1978). I presented a version of the present work at the "Politics in the Hebrew Bible's Prophetic Literature" seminar, at the 2016 CSBS Annual Meeting, University of Calgary. At the seminar, Mark Boda presented an official response to the essay; many thanks to Mark for his insightful and constructive critique. At the seminar, too, Francis Landy was in attendance and, as usual, offered incisive feedback. I have met no other person whose readings of Isaiah's visions are as visionary as Francis's, and I am honored to dedicate this essay to him as he enters his eighth decade of life.

2 Ackroyd, "Isaiah I–XII," 21.

3 The ultimate outgrowth of this work was Carroll's *When Prophecy Failed: Cognitive Dissonance in the Prophetic Traditions of the Old Testament* (New York: Seabury, 1979). See esp. pp. 130-56 for Carroll's thoughts on Isaiah.

4 Ackroyd, "Isaiah I–XII," 34.

certain “historical attachment”⁵ that links the figure of Isaiah with a succession of Davidic rulers in Jerusalem and with the imperial endeavors of Assyria, but also with a kind of ahistorical imagination of things to come. The unit concludes finally with the psalm in ch. 12, which lends legitimacy to this presentation of the prophet and his activities vis-à-vis Jerusalem, its political past and future.

Ackroyd’s argument is, thus, all about history and politics, about the complex processes of remembering and imagining Judah’s power and its power relations vis-à-vis its neighbors, its imperial overlords, and its deity Yahweh; and about how a particular prophet of old was remembered as speaking to and envisioning these issues. Although my own essay here is not interested in Ackroyd’s main question per se, it is interested in the implications of his answers. If Isaiah 1-12 presents an authoritative prophet as a figure to be associated with the book, as a kind of character meant to inform readings of the text, how then might the historiographical and political themes presented alongside this figure also inform such readings, in the book’s ancient Judean milieu?

In what follows I will sketch an outline of how the book of Isaiah presents its politics, working from the assumption – based on the research of Ackroyd and others – that the presentation of Isaiah, the prophet, in the book’s opening chapters is key. I will end up arguing that the book advocates for Davidic politics, as others have claimed, but that its discourse does not settle on any one single Davidic hope or disappointment for the community going forward. Riffing on anthropologist Maurice Bloch, I would say that, for Isaianic discourse, David is central but is nothing special.⁶ This argument, too, has more general implications for how we understand prophetic books as literary artifacts from ancient Judah and also for how we understand the lived experience of Judean society in the early Second Temple era, a people whose lives had been subject to various forms of imperial rule for several centuries.

I

I begin with a few brief comments on method. I take what Jacob Stromberg calls a “descriptive/discourse-oriented” approach to the book of Isaiah.⁷ This

5 Ackroyd, “Isaiah 1-XII,” 41.

6 See Bloch’s essay “Why religion is nothing special but is central,” *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B* 363 (2008), 2055-61.

7 See Stromberg’s *An Introduction to the Study of Isaiah*, T&T Clark Approaches to Biblical Studies (London: T&T Clark International, 2011). The term “discourse-oriented” he takes up from Meir Sternberg.

does not mean, however, that I am *not* interested in history, or that my description of the book's discourse is *not* critical and historicist in orientation. To the contrary, I am deeply interested in the historical community responsible for this text and its discourse, the sociocultural setting in which the book emerged as such, and in which it was initially read and received.

There is no doubt that the book of Isaiah is a literary text, which demonstrates both awareness of itself and a sense of unity, and that it was read as such in antiquity.⁸ Sirach 48:23–25, for example, contains references to both Isa 2:1 and 61:2–3, implying that, by the second century BCE at the latest, the book was read as a unified discourse attributed to a prophet named Isaiah from long ago.⁹ And there is good reason for us to push the emergence of that unified discourse back a couple centuries, into the early Second Temple period.¹⁰ The ancient Judean book of Isaiah, then, as we are more or less able to know it from textual witnesses such as the MT, the LXX, and the Qumran scrolls, is a source for our knowledge of this period.¹¹ And holistic, discourse-oriented approaches to this source can make significant contributions to our understandings of the community in which and for which the book emerged.¹²

8 Cf. Isa 1:27–31, which has much in common with material found in chs. 56–66, suggesting that the book's opening passage and its closing passages were shaped and read with each other in mind. Another example is the interrelationship between 11:6–9 and 65:25. See Stromberg, *Study of Isaiah*, 51–53 and 67–72, for discussion of these references, and also 77–93, for his discussion of a “holistic approach” to Isaiah, the book.

9 Cf. Shalom Paul, *Isaiah 40–66: A Commentary*, Eerdmans Critical Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012), 1; also Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 1–39*, AB 19 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 84.

10 Note 2 Chr 32:32, and see, e.g., comments in Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 1–39*, 84–85. Marvin Sweeney, *Isaiah 1–39, with an Introduction to Prophetic Literature*, FOTL 16 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 51–55, argues for a similar time frame for the book's “final form” but does so by linking the text with Ezra–Nehemiah traditions. In any case, there is good reason to date the book of Isaiah and its discourse to this era.

11 On the difference between a “book” and various instantiations of it, see Ronald Hendel, “What Is a Biblical Book?” in *From Author to Copyist: Essays on the Composition, Redaction, and Transmission of the Hebrew Bible in Honor of Zipi Talshir*, ed. Cana Werman (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2015), 283–302.

12 Cf. Ehud Ben Zvi, “The Yehudite Collection of Prophetic Books and Imperial Contexts: Some Observations,” in *Divination, Politics, and Ancient Near Eastern Empires*, ed. Alan Lenzi and Jonathan Stökl, ANEM 7 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2014), 145–69 (online: <https://www.sbl-site.org/publications/Books_ANEMonographs.aspx>), who argues that, when linguists study grammar for example, they focus not only on new developments in vocabulary and syntax, but on how these developments fit into and work within existing linguistic structures (146–47). Thus, to investigate the sociopolitical interests of the literate

II

Following Ackroyd, scholarship on Isaiah has generally acknowledged the key import of the book's "presentation" of its prophet, especially in chapters 1-12. His essay has been rather influential. The question here is: How does the book present its politics along the same lines?

Here I would like to build upon and interact with the recent work of Jacob Stromberg, mentioned above, who has a keen interest in the political themes developed via the book's discourse, and whose work follows Ackroyd at a number of key points.¹³ Stromberg argues that in chs. 7 and 8 in particular, a leitmotif develops based on several key terms that one may trace throughout book. He sums up this leitmotif as follows: "[T]he 'plans' [עצה/עוין] of foreign nations will 'not stand' [קום] and are destined to be 'frustrated' [פרר] when they come up against the divine plan tied to the house of David."¹⁴ Having established the development of this leitmotif, he argues for a holistic reading of the book that would result from it. According to Stromberg, Ahaz (in ch. 7) and Hezekiah (in chs. 36-39) are narrative analogues. Each king faces a significant and imminent foreign threat. In the face of the threat, Ahaz fails in his faith while Hezekiah demonstrates piety. In the end, however, each receives a promise of *future* crisis, despite their disparate reactions to the immediate threat. So, in light of these two analogous but contradictory Davidic exemplars, what is to become of the Davidic line? The narrative structure of chs. 1-39, Stromberg argues, would push readers into chs. 40-66 with anticipation for answers. To find potential answers, he traces and examines the interconnected instances of the word "sign" throughout the book (e.g., 7:10; 37:30; 38:7; 55:13; 66:19), concluding that these signs collectively indicate an awaited return from exile and a restoration of temple worship in Zion/Jerusalem, at least for the pious remnant. This indication, he says, echoes the Davidic covenant of 2 Samuel 7 and alludes, especially in chs. 65-66, to the royal oracles earlier in the book (e.g., 11:1-9). In other words, according to Stromberg's analysis, the book strategically reaffirms the ongoing import and awaited return of Davidic kingship for Israel's faithful.¹⁵

community in early Second Temple Judah vis-à-vis the book of Isaiah, we should study not only the so-called Trito-Isaiah, for example, but should study the book as a whole, as it likely existed, was read, and contributed to discourse(s) in that period.

13 He also draws on seminal studies by Willem Beuken, Hugh Williamson, and others.

14 Cf. the wording of Isaiah 8:9-10; 14:24-27; 19:11-17; and 23:8-9. See Stromberg, *Study of Isaiah*, 84-93 (quote from 87).

15 See Stromberg, *Study of Isaiah*, 114-27.

Now, in that short paragraph I have not done justice to the complexity and nuance of Stromberg's reading, which is perceptive of the complex details in the text, to be sure. Nonetheless, suffice it to say for the time being that I find this interpretation a little too narrow and focused, perhaps too monolithic, for such a sprawling and multivocal text as Isaiah. The problem is, in the book: What precisely is the "divine plan tied to the house of David"? How does the book of Isaiah conceive of Davidic kingship? While I agree that a reaffirmation of the Davidic promise, and even a hopeful longing for another Davidic king, is a strong voice in the book, it is not the only one, nor is it even the only voice speaking to the future of the Davidic line. Below I will outline some of the various discursive statements in the book that complicate any singular focus on the awaited return of an actual human (or superhuman) Davidic monarchy. But in short, while I agree that Davidic kingship is central to the book's discourse, I submit that the book hedges on its understanding of what Davidic kingship could and should be going forward, thus reflecting a kind of hedging with regard to Davidic kingship within the early Second Temple community in general. Thinking about another work of ancient Judean literature, the book of Samuel, David Jobling once wrote that the literature fails to control its subject matter, and that the contradictions in the texts reflect "*contradictions in the mindset that receives them*."¹⁶ I think the same about the book of Isaiah, and I think the hedging is evident in the book's presentation of its prophet and thus its prophetic politics, in its opening chapters.

III

As Ackroyd argued long ago, it was the presentation of an authoritative, yet richly ambiguous, prophet in chs. 1-12 that probably enabled the formation of such a vast and variegated collection of prophetic texts into a unified discourse that we now call the *book* of Isaiah. And as Stromberg argues in detail, chs. 1 and 6 – which are intertextually linked with chs. 65–66 – provide a framework that may function as a "literary lens through which to view the other oracles in the book."¹⁷ At this point, I would like to focus mainly on chapter 6. Via its presentation of the prophet's call, it makes "blindsight" necessary for any insight into the book, deafness key for any real hearing of its messages.¹⁸ As the proph-

¹⁶ David Jobling, *1 Samuel*, Berit Olam (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1998), 19.

¹⁷ Stromberg, *Study of Isaiah*, 107.

¹⁸ Cf. Robert Carroll, "Blindsight and the Vision Thing: Blindness and Insight in the Book of Isaiah," in *Writing and Reading the Scroll of Isaiah: Studies of an Interpretive Tradition*, ed.

et's call to prophesy, too, it has a marked narrational import: it is a scene standing at the beginning of the prophet's career, a scene that shapes that career's trajectory as represented in a prophetic book with a rough chronological ordering.¹⁹ The paradox of blindsight, then, would inform understandings of the book's politics, and the book's politics would in turn reinforce the paradox of the prophet's mission, as represented in the book.

Thinking on this presentation of the prophet's call in ch. 6, Francis Landy focuses on the relationship between the prophet and his messages, the "potential opposition between the prophet and what he sees, the prophet as a site of resistance to the prophecy."²⁰ Chapter 6, Landy states, is "a metaprophetic key to the book," a literary instance at which the "I" of Isaiah, the humanity of the prophet as represented in the text, comes together with the "Eye" of Isaiah, the visionary aspect of the book as prophetic literature. The passage introduces readers to the literary figure of Isaiah and his task, and it gives insight into how to read the text itself.²¹ Landy goes on to argue that the book as a whole, like the call passage in ch. 6, is characterized by divine and thus prophetic ambivalence. Its reading is informed by diptychs of hope and doom.²² The problem of Isaiah, the prophet and the book,

is a problem of translation. Isaiah has to translate the language of the future age in terms of this one, while letting the audience know that their mother tongue is now strange, that the conditions of their world have shifted. It is a translation back from the language of the future to the

C.C. Broyles and C.A. Evans, *vtsup* 70 (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 79-93; also Francis Landy, "I and Eye in Isaiah, or Gazing at the Invisible," *JBL* 131 (2012): 85-97. A comparable theme in the book is that of the interrelationship between remembering and forgetting. See, e.g., ch. 43, which brings to mind the exodus and Song of the Sea as a way of envisioning the future, but also commands the people to forget the former things, *not* to remember the things of old. Cf. Ian D. Wilson, "The Song of the Sea and Isaiah: Exodus 15 in Post-monarchic Prophetic Discourse," in *Thinking of Water in the Early Second Temple Period*, ed. E. Ben Zvi and C. Levin, *BZAW* 461 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014), 123-48 (139-42); also idem, "Yahweh's Consciousness: Isaiah 40-48 and Ancient Judean Historical Thought," *VT* 66 (2016), 646-61.

19 Stromberg, *Study of Isaiah*, 109-10, citing a number of earlier studies, shows that there are allusions to ch. 6 throughout the book, and argues that the scene in ch. 6 would guide reading and remembering of the prophet and his work as a whole.

20 Landy, "I and Eye," 85.

21 Landy, "I and Eye," 87. For a survey of various interpretations of the classic double bind in Isaiah 6, that the people should hear but not understand and that they should see but not perceive, see pp. 87-90.

22 Landy, "I and Eye," 92, citing the work of Willem Beuken.

present, but also an anticipation of the language of the future in the present....

The problem of politics in the book of Isaiah is likewise one of translation. How would one read the language of intersection between past and future, somehow at once grasping and mastering the shifting conditions of power in the world?

This problem of translation plays out in brief historiographically minded passages – in ch. 7 for example – and thus in the book's presentation of the prophet's own life and time in Judah's past. King Ahaz, repeatedly noted as a descendant of David (7:2, 13; cf. 7:17), is anxious with news of immediate threat. But Isaiah speaks of political happenings well beyond the present moment: the shattering of Ephraim as a people, some sixty-five years hence (7:8); and Assyria's eventual total dominance of the Levant (7:17–20). In the face of imminent international danger, the prophet tells the king simply to sit tight, to do nothing and wait, which political theorist Michael Walzer calls “the prophetic idea of a religiously sanctioned foreign policy.”²³ Isaiah's political engagement is one of disengagement. The prophet and the king inhabit different social and political spheres and therefore speak different languages. They are seemingly unable to communicate at this juncture. “Sit tight, do nothing” are words that Ahaz does not know how to hear, and “make international alliances” are words that Isaiah does not know how to (i.e., cannot) utter. It is only with the “sign” of 7:14 – the עִלְמָה pregnant with a child to be called Immanuel – which brings the message into Ahaz's physical here and now, that the communicative gap between prophet and monarch is somewhat bridged. The king receives a prophetic sign, but the sign is “enigmatic; we do not know what will become of the child, or whether he will choose good or evil. But that very openness of choice suggests something beyond the deterministic antimonies of ch. 6, as well as the sterile contention of king and prophet.”²⁴

In addition, as mentioned above, Stromberg and others have argued that, within the structure of the book, Ahaz and Hezekiah – both called out and marked as Davidic descendants (7:2, 13; 37:35; 38:5) – function as analogues to one another. Hezekiah demonstrates piety in the face of Rabshakeh's threats and receives a prophetic message of immediate protection (cf. ch. 37), but the prophet nonetheless speaks of coming judgment too, of a distant future that seems unfathomable to the Davidic king, of a time when *Babylon* would cap-

23 Michael Walzer, *In God's Shadow: Politics in the Hebrew Bible* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 100.

24 Landy, “I and Eye,” 95.

ture Jerusalem and the king's own sons would be taken away (39:5-8).²⁵ Hezekiah, focused on his own situation and lifetime, appears not to recognize the real, long term impact of Isaiah's vision for the future. In response to Isaiah's message of impending doom, the king replies, "Good is Yahweh's word, which you have spoken ... for there will be peace and security in my days" (39:8).²⁶ The problem of prophetic translation is thus firmly established.

The translation problem plays out, too, in the book's presentation of ongoing sociopolitical negotiations in present and future horizons. It therefore had import in the actual lives of the book's postmonarchic readers, who would see themselves as translators of this divine knowledge from long ago, as ones contemplating and anticipating the shifting conditions of their own world, via the represented personage and visions of Isaiah the prophet.

If, as described above, Stromberg and others are at least partly correct in arguing that the opening chapters of Isaiah develop a political leitmotif centered upon Yahweh's plans for Davidic kingship, then where would this particular motif lead the book's readers? Time and space do not permit a full discussion of these issues, but I would like at least to sketch some potential answers, keeping in mind Landy's observation that the tension between prophetic persona and prophetic vision, rooted in the prophetic double-bind of ch. 6, is "germinal to the poetics of the book of Isaiah."²⁷ First, to be clear, Stromberg offers one potential reading, and it is compelling in a number of its particulars.²⁸ There is little question that the latter chapters of the book point toward an awaited reestablishment of proper temple worship in Jerusalem. In Judean discourse, any mention of the temple carries with it possible interconnections with Davidic kingship and the divine promises to that dynasty, as prominently recounted in the books of Samuel and Chronicles. So, there are at least thematic links between Isaiah's visions of future restoration and Davidic rule. And in any case, as Stromberg details, 65:25 refers back directly to the

25 Although Isa 37 presents a pious Hezekiah who trusts in his deity, other passages in Isaiah perhaps emphasize Hezekiah's *lack* of trust in Yahweh: e.g., Judah's turning to Egypt for assistance (30:1-7; 31:1; cf. 36:6, 9), activity that commentators often link with Hezekiah. Scholars have long debated the connections between Isa 36-39 and 28-33, and between Isa 36-39 and 2 Kgs 18-20, and how these texts variously represent the figure of Hezekiah as Judah's king, for better or worse. See Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 1-39*, 458-61, for a good overview of the issues involved.

26 Of course, as Francis Landy has asked me, what if he does recognize the full extent of Isaiah's vision? How are we to read Hezekiah's response here? Dumbfounded-ness? Pious resignation? Cynicism? The state of mind behind the king's words is an open question.

27 Landy, "I and Eye," 97.

28 See Stromberg, *Study of Isaiah*, 113-127.

oracle of 11:1-9, a very specific vision of future Davidic kingship.²⁹ This line of thought, however, is only one potential political statement afforded within the discursive limits of the book. To be sure, Stromberg's position is not wrong per se, but it is merely one possible position within the book's discursive framework. The Davidic promise, as important as it no doubt was, was overdetermined in Judean discourse.³⁰ The issue of David and Davidic kingship was central to the thinking of the ancient Judean literate community – the issue is pervasive in the community's literature – but there was no uniform way to think about it, even within a single book like Isaiah. And as I argue below, there are other voices in the text, other lines of reading that provide counterpoints to Davidide-focused perspectives, and these are evident in the book's opening chapters as well.

IV

Allow me to cite just a few examples to support that claim, beginning with material in the latter part of the book and then concluding with the book's opening chapters. To be sure, Isaiah 11:1-9 contains a powerful image of an individual Davidic ruler, one who will rule with superhuman capabilities, who will apparently strike down enemies with words (11:4) and judge by sense of smell (11:3; whatever that might actually mean), whose rule will usher in a kind of utopian existence.³¹ This is a conspicuous image that has connections with

29 Stromberg, *Study of Isaiah*, 67-70, 125. To be clear, the text in 65:25 refers specifically to content in 11:6-9, and therefore does not necessarily make reference to any Davidic ruler. Isaiah 66:1, moreover, emphasizes Yahweh's absolute kingship over the heavens and earth. As Stromberg argues, however, it is unlikely that a reader would recognize an allusion to 11:6-9 and then read those verses devoid of their immediate context. In Isaiah 11, it is clear that the scene imagined in vv. 6-9 is dependent upon the rule of the Davidide described in vv. 1-5. And in Isaiah 65 at least, there is nothing that would preclude a Davidic king. Intertextuality is multidirectional: it is possible, of course, that readers would draw on the vision of Isaiah 65 to reimagine that of Isaiah 11, but it is also possible that Isaiah 11 would frame understandings of Isaiah 65. Both readings (and others) would be in play. With such readings in mind, Francis Landy has told me that he understands the end of Isaiah to be "creating a salad of utopian imagery" in its attempt to find closure.

30 See, e.g., Gary N. Knoppers, "David's Relation to Moses: The Contexts, Content and Conditions of the Davidic Promises," in *King and Messiah in Israel and the Ancient Near East: Proceedings of the Oxford Old Testament Seminar*, ed. John Day, JSOTSUP 270 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 91-118.

31 I take the difficult clause in 11:3 (והריחו ביראת יהוה) quite literally, in line with the Davidide's superhuman nature described throughout the passage, which stands in juxta-

9:5-6 and with chs. 32-33 (and perhaps even with 65:25, as mentioned above), thus providing one possible framework for reading the book. But later in the book, in the only passage in all of chs. 40-66 that *explicitly* refers to David or Davidic kingship, we find a rather different image. In Isaiah 55:1-5, Davidic kingship is “democratized”, as it were:³²

Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food. Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live. I will make with you an everlasting [עולם] covenant, my steadfast, sure love for David. See, I made him a witness to the peoples, a leader [נגיד] and commander for the peoples. See, you shall call nations that you do not know, and nations that do not

position with the description of the Assyrian king in ch. 10. On superhuman kingship in the prophetic books, see Ian D. Wilson, “Faster than a speeding bullet, more powerful than a locomotive, able to rule by sense of smell! Superhuman Kingship in the Prophetic Books,” pp. 30-44 in “Not in the Spaces We Know’: An Exploration of Science Fiction and the Bible,” ed. Frauke Uhlenbruch, *JHebS* 16 (2016), article 9 (online: <http://www.jhsonline.org/Articles/article_221.pdf>). Notably, the Davidide’s justice and righteousness, and the peaceful existence that coincides with such rule, was not thought to be out of the ordinary for the imperial regimes of the ancient Near East. Cf. Zech 1:11, e.g., which recognizes the successful rule of the Persian empire (and laments Judah’s continued state of desolation despite Persian successes). It is not only the wolf dwelling with the lamb that is subversive, in Isaiah 11; it is also the means by which that state of existence is brought about.

- 32 A much discussed issue. See, e.g., Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, vol. 2: *The Theology of Israel’s Prophetic Traditions*, trans. D.M.G. Stalker (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1965 [German original 1960]), 240; Otto Eissfeldt, “The Promises of Grace to David in Isaiah 55:1-5,” in *Israel’s Prophetic Heritage: Essays in Honor of James Muilenburg*, ed. Bernhard W. Anderson and Walter Harrelson (New York: Harper, 1962), 196-207; Kenneth E. Pomykala, *The Davidic Dynasty Tradition in Early Judaism: Its History and Significance for Messianism*, SBL Early Judaism and Its Literature 7 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995), 38-41; Marvin A. Sweeney, “The Reconceptualization of the Davidic Covenant in Isaiah,” in *Reading Prophetic Books: Form, Intertextuality, and Reception in Prophetic and Post-Biblical Literature*, FAT 89 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014 [original 1997]), 94-113; Scott R.A. Starbuck, “Theological Anthropology at a Fulcrum: Isaiah 55:1-5, Psalm 89, and Second Stage Tradition in the Royal Psalms,” in *David and Zion: Biblical Studies in Honor of J.J.M. Roberts*, ed. Bernard F. Batto and Kathryn L. Roberts (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2004), 247-65; Joseph Blenkinsopp, “The Theological Politics of Deutero-Isaiah,” in *Divination, Politics, and Ancient Near Eastern Empires*, 129-43, esp. 133-35.

know you shall run to you, because of Yahweh your God, the Holy One of Israel, for he has glorified you. (cf. NRSV)

The language here is keyed to the Davidic promises, the Davidic throne's "everlasting" (עולם) status (e.g., 2 Sam 7:14–16; 22:51; 23:5; Ps 89; etc.), and the king's appointment as a "leader" (גיד) in place of Saul (2 Sam 5:2). But the passage is not concerned with a future Davidide; it is using David as an analogue for the people as a whole. This poor and misguided people (i.e., postmonarchic Judah) is to become, via the power of Yahweh, a ruler of nations: Israel will summon unknown nations and unknown nations will stream to them. The text conjures up a fuzzy image of Davidic and Solomonic renown from long ago, but this time it is the people's renown, *kingly fame for the collective*, not renown for any individual ruler. And note that a few lines below, in 55:12–13, the people return home with such joy that even the mountains and trees applaud them, an event that will stand as an everlasting "sign" (אזכרה) of Yahweh's devotion to his people. So here, one of the book's "signs" – which, as mentioned above, are crucial to Stromberg's reading of the book – indicates a kind of Davidic kingship, indeed, but that kingship has been reconstituted as a collective ideal, as a royal people meant to govern the nations.

Moreover, there are other images in the latter portion of the book that *implicitly* recall Davidic kingship, but which do not necessarily envision or allude to anything like the superhuman Davidide of ch. 11. Take, for example, the presentation of Cyrus in chs. 44–45. In that passage a foreigner – one who according to Deuteronomic law would not be eligible for kingship over Israel (cf. Deut 17:15) – stands as Yahweh's appointed shepherd and temple builder (44:28), as the deity's anointed one (משיח; 45:1). The language in this passage, with its constellation of references to narratives and psalms of Davidic kingship, makes Cyrus a quasi-Davidide, a bridge figure between the ideal for indigenous Judean rule and the reality of foreign imperial dominance. A bridge, of course, at once makes a connection between two separate things *and* acts as a monument to the separation itself. Memorializing Cyrus in this way was one (but certainly not the only) means of negotiating Judah's political identity under imperial rule in the early Second Temple era.³³ Compare also

33 For a full discussion of these issues, see Ian D. Wilson, "Yahweh's Anointed: Cyrus, Deuteronomy's Law of the King, and Yehudite Identity," in *Political Memory in and after the Persian Period*, ed. Jason M. Silverman and Caroline Waerzeggers, ANEM 13 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2015), 325–61 (online: <http://www.sbl-site.org/assets/pdfs/pubs/g780884140894_OA.pdf>). See also Jason M. Silverman, "From Remembering to Expecting the 'Messiah': Achaemenid Kingship as (Re)Formulating Apocalyptic Expectations of David," in *Political*

61:1-3, a passage in which the *prophetic figure*, not any king (Davidic or otherwise), speaks of himself as Yahweh's anointed (מִשָּׁח יְהוָה אֲתִי; 61:1), as the one to release the captives and raise up the lowly.³⁴ And it is worth mentioning, too, that when a future Davidide is imagined in other prophetic books (e.g., Jer 23:5-6; 33:12-26; Ezek 34:23-24; 37:24-25; etc.) – texts that were also without question part of the literary repertoire of early Second Temple Judah – he is decidedly more “normal,” more human in his depiction and in his reliance upon other bureaucratic and cultic entities. In those books the envisioned Davidide is not one who rules by sense of smell. The images of future Davidic kingship, both within the book of Isaiah and across the prophetic corpus, were diverse.³⁵

Turning back toward the beginning of the book, in Isa 2:2-4 (cf. Mic 4:1-5) we find yet another image of future rule, and in that image there is no human king at all.³⁶ Instead there is Yahweh alone, with his “instruction” (תּוֹרָה). Nations will gather under him in Jerusalem, where he will “rule” (שָׁפֵט) and “arbitrate” (יָחַד Hiph.) and no one will know war (2:4). In this image there is no readily apparent recollection of David, of the Davidic line, or of any future (super) human manifestation of it; nor are there any recognizable allusions to such things. There is only Yahweh. How then do we understand the interrelationship between this image of Jerusalem's political restoration, and the images cited above, with the image of a powerful and preternatural Davidide in chapter 11? What kind of political vision(s) for the future would the book of Isaiah communicate to its readers?

Citing Ackroyd's famous study, with which I began this paper, I would first point to the structure of the book's opening chapters and how it presents the prophet and his message. I would point out that the image in Isa 2:2-4 mitigates and provides a conclusion to the harsh judgment of Jerusalem presented in much of chapter 1.³⁷ Similarly, I would point out that the Davidide of ch. 11 provides a hopeful subversion of the hubristic Assyrian king in ch. 10, and thus a ballast to the judgmental focus of chapter 10.³⁸ Chapters 1-11, therefore, are bookended with contrasting images of doom and hope, of punishment and

Memory in and after the Persian Period, 419-46, who discusses possible intersections between understandings of Davidic kingship and Persian kingship, in the early Second Temple period and after.

34 Cf. Landy, “I and Eye,” 96.

35 For full discussion of Davidic kingship in the prophetic books, see Ian D. Wilson, *Kingship and Memory in Ancient Judah* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 198-216.

36 On this passage, see Francis Landy, “Torah and Anti-Torah: Isaiah 2:2-4 and 1:10-26,” *BibInt* 11 (2003): 317-34.

37 Cf. Ackroyd, “Isaiah I-XII,” 34, 42-43.

38 Cf. Ackroyd, “Isaiah I-XII,” 44.

restoration. In one (chs. 1-2), the restoration is founded upon Yahweh's sole rule and Torah propagation in Jerusalem, and in the other (chs. 10-11) the return of Davidic kingship provides the peaceful renewal. Chapter 12, then, provides a "colophon", as it were, which reinforces and authorizes the overarching message of what precedes in chs. 1-11 (and thus what follows in the rest of the book).³⁹ "[A]s the prophet is presented in these chapters," writes Ackroyd, "there is clear evidence of the chiaroscuro by which the prospect of the future is set out against the background of a recognition of failure and doom.... [T]he prophet appears to us as a man of judgement and salvation."⁴⁰ Highlighting this ambiguity in the text, and even inferring that the book's vision of the future is somewhat blurry, Ackroyd nonetheless repeatedly hones in on Davidic kingship as the likely final outcome on the political horizon. He reads 6:1-9:6 as the core of chs. 1-12, and argues that 6:13, the obscure reference to a holy seed, points to the famous royal oracle in 9:1-6, which of course foresees David's throne and kingdom being established "forever" (9:6), and which has ties to the vision in chapter 11.

I differ with Ackroyd, however, in how I understand the implications of this apparent literary structure within the book's discourse. As I stated above, I do not wish to refute Ackroyd's influential reading and the work it has informed, only to show that *other readings are possible within the discourse*, which in turn may have an impact on how we understand the book's contribution to ancient Judean politics. Overemphasizing any Davidide-focused reading blinds us to other possibilities in the text, other political visions that the text presents with no less authority.⁴¹ I return here to Francis Landy's observations about the problem of prophetic translation, past and future, a problem that is introduced in the key narrative in ch. 6, and that reinforces itself throughout the book. By interpreting the Davidide figure as the sole (or even main) political savior indicated in the text, we are like Ahaz struggling to receive the prophet's words. The text speaks with one language while we insist on hearing with another. In prophetic literature, rarely is there any inherent, *singular* line of reading, even

39 Cf. Ackroyd, "Isaiah I-XII," 34-40, 44.

40 Ackroyd, "Isaiah I-XII," 45.

41 Cf. Willem A.M. Beuken, "Major Interchanges in the Book of Isaiah Subservient to Its Umbrella Theme: The Establishment of Yhwh's Sovereign Rule at Mt. Zion (Chs. 12-13; 27-28; 39-40; 55-66)," and Ulrich Berges, "Kingship and Servanthood in the Book of Isaiah," both in *The Book of Isaiah: Enduring Questions Answered Anew*, Essays Honoring Joseph Blenkinsopp and His Contribution to the Study of Isaiah, ed. Richard J. Bautch and J. Todd Hibbard (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014), 113-32 and 159-78, respectively. Each, in different ways, argues that the book promotes Yahweh's kingship over and above any human rule, Davidic or otherwise.

in texts with obvious literary structures. The demarcations between passages blur; possible interrelationships and interpretations multiply, within the discursive limits of any given prophetic book. In recent years Ehud Ben Zvi, among others, has argued extensively that the multivocality of prophetic books would lend itself to “branched modes of reading,” that is, a resistance to reading books and passages within books “in a narrow linear manner.”⁴² In Isaiah 1-12 (and in the book as a whole), for example, ch. 6 is undoubtedly a key passage, a metaprophetic guide to a complex discourse. But we must be careful not to reduce the implication of this key passage to any one possible reading, especially when the passage itself presents a paradox related to matters of understanding and interpretation. (Notice, too, that the vision in ch. 6 begins with reference to *Yahweh's* kingship, his sitting upon a “high and lofty throne” [v. 1]!) Reading chs. 1-12 with questions of political futures in mind would point toward the Davidic hopes of 9:1-6 and 11:1-9 as counterpoints to the woes and judgments stated in chs. 5 and 9 and in ch. 10, respectively, as Ackroyd argues. But this particular reading would not override or eliminate the import of 2:2-4, for example, which envisions *Yahweh* alone as king of Israel and which introduces themes that echo throughout the entire book;⁴³ nor would it necessarily inform an understanding of the hymn in ch. 12, which caps off the entire unit that includes chs. 1-11 and which again focuses on the might of *Yahweh* alone. The text presents possible readings that stand outside and independent of the Davidide-centered intertextual linkages emphasized by Ackroyd and others. But that is not a problem at all, given the vision of chapter 6. In fact, that is what we should expect.

In other words, even if the end of ch. 6 points to the anticipation of a Davidic ruler in ch. 9 (and thus ch. 11), I would argue that the important vision of *Yahweh* ruling alone, in ch. 2, nonetheless stands, as do other visions of political futures that do not have Davidic kingship in mind whatsoever. The prophetic double-bind of ch. 6 opens up these discursive possibilities in the first place. There are a variety of texts in Isaiah that present images outside the Davidide-focused lines of reading suggested by Ackroyd, Stromberg, and others, thus complicating any singular, unified political vision for Davidic kingship that the

42 Ehud Ben Zvi, “Is the Twelve Hypothesis Likely from an Ancient Reader’s Perspective?” in Ehud Ben Zvi and James D. Nogalski, *Two Sides of a Coin: Juxtaposing Views on Interpreting the Book of the Twelve/Twelve Prophetic Books*, Analecta Gorgiana 201 (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias, 2009), 93. See also Francis Landy, “Three Sides of a Coin: In Conversation with Ben Zvi and Nogalski,” *Two Sides of a Coin*, *JHebS* 10 (2010), article 11 (online: <http://www.jhsonline.org/Articles/article_139.pdf>).

43 Cf. H.G.M. Williamson, *Isaiah 1-5*, ICC (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 172.

book might indicate. There is no sure-fire way to argue for the precedence of any one vision over another, in the course of the book. The structure of Isaiah 1-12 itself, with ch. 6 at its foundation, undermines any univocal reading. And in any case, as I highlighted above, what precisely Davidic kingship might mean going forward is not clearly delineated in the book. Will the Davidic promises be reconceptualized in terms of the people as a whole? Might foreign rulers somehow fill the void left by the collapse of the Davidic dynasty? Or is something entirely different on the horizon? For its Judean readers, the book's discourse presented a horizon of possibilities, rather than any one dominant answer. This was not to say that anything goes, or that anything is possible, but that the book set forth certain discursive limits, thought to be envisioned by the prophet Isaiah long ago, in which and by which political conversation could happen.

V

Walzer, in his recent study of the Hebrew Bible, asks, "Is there anything like [political] deliberation in the Bible?"⁴⁴ For the most part he says no, but he also thinks that the function of prophet figures, who commonly interact with rulers and other officials in the public sphere, in both historiographical and prophetic texts, might provide a major exception. After surveying the texts and commenting on how the prophets publicly judge the powers that be, he concludes,

[I]f anything is to come of those judgments [of the prophets], some people, the prophets themselves or the men and women in their audience, must 'speak words' [cf. Hos 10:4], must argue about what ought to be done, and listen to counterarguments, and work toward 'covenants' or agreements, even if these require compromise and accommodation. Politics lie just beyond prophecy, but the biblical prophets, judging from their texts, did not go there.⁴⁵

In the end, then, he does not find real deliberation in the literature, only the possibility of such. His answer to the question, though, is informed by a reading of the texts that searches for point blank description of political deliberation,

44 Walzer, *In God's Shadow*, 73. He asks the question in response to philosopher Stuart Hampshire's claim that all human societies have always debated politics.

45 Walzer, *In God's Shadow*, 88.

for literal public policy debate between power brokers – kings, priests, and prophets.⁴⁶ As I have shown above, there is indeed political deliberation in the literature, arguments about what ought to or could be done, counterarguments and compromise. The deliberation is to be found in the social imaginary of the community's future, the diverse visions of political possibilities represented in prophetic discourse like the book of Isaiah.

Focusing on prophetic books as literary artifacts from the early Second Temple era, as sources for that social and historical milieu, rather than reading them as descriptions of political actors and activities in the eras they describe, provides a different view of political debate in ancient Judah. The very fact that the early Second Temple community produced and read such multivocal and politically inclined literature speaks to the community's deliberations over its political past and future. It is a bit of begging the question to say that literature points to its literary culture, but the statement is true nonetheless. Instead of attempting to reconstruct sociopolitical actors and activities in the histories of ancient Israel and Judah – i.e., unpacking the political functions of kings and kingship, prophets and prophecy, and so on, in the narratives⁴⁷ – we should be thinking of the *literature itself* as a type of sociopolitical actor and activity in its primary milieu.⁴⁸ The literature represents the social remembering of political forces past and future, and it therefore speaks to the present sociopolitical interests of the community that formed the discourse – those who composed, read, propagated, and thus lent authority to, the texts themselves. In this way, the literature may not provide us any direct access to prophetic activity in ancient Israel and Judah or to that activity's interrelationship with politics and

46 Compare, e.g., Max Weber, *Ancient Judaism*, trans. and ed. Hans H. Gerth and Don Martindale (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1952), which Walzer cites throughout his study.

47 See, e.g., Weber's famous study of "the prophet," *The Sociology of Religion*, trans. Ephraim Fischhoff (Boston: Beacon, 1963 [German original 1922]), 46-59; and also his more specific discussion of the biblical prophets' political activities and dispositions, *Ancient Judaism*, 267-335.

48 Referring to the "literature itself," here my comments echo Mario Liverani's well-known thoughts about ancient historiographical literature (see his "Memorandum on the Approach to Historiographic Texts," *Orientalia* 42 [1973]: 178-94), and indeed I have argued elsewhere that we should think of the prophetic books as having existed in a kind of meta-generic relationship with the historiographical (see Wilson, *Kingship and Memory in Ancient Judah*, esp. chs. 5 and 6). Cf. Michael H. Floyd, "New Form Criticism and Beyond: The Historicity of the Prophetic Literature Revisited," in *The Book of the Twelve and the New Form Criticism*, ed. Mark J. Boda, Michael H. Floyd, and Colin M. Toffelmire, ANEM 10 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2015), 17-36 (online: <https://www.sbl-site.org/assets/pdfs/pubs/9781628370614_OA.pdf>), who asks: "[W]ere the writers of the prophetic books in some sense historiographers?" (18).

political figures prior to the Second Temple – a point that scholarship on the prophetic books has made for some time now. But the literature does give us some sense of how the community that produced and read prophetic literature *thought about* such past figures and, thus, how this thinking might have informed the community's understandings of its own present sociopolitical situations.⁴⁹ These sources are, then, still very useful for historical discussions of politics in ancient Judah.

What I would like to do, to conclude, is to promote the prophetic books as invaluable sources for accessing Judeans' lived experience of politics in the early Second Temple period, in order to make ongoing and significant contributions to the knowledge of broader political contexts in the ancient Near East. Historians of the ancient world have made a number of strides in recent years in this direction, which I think could provide some guidance to our study of politics and prophetic literature within the context of empire.⁵⁰ What these recent studies attempt to get at is the "discrepant identities" of peoples in the

49 Cf. Floyd, "New Form Criticism and Beyond," who discusses how collections of oracles associated with particular prophetic personages might have come to form prophetic books in ancient Judah. He writes, "Just as the scribal authors found typological connections among the collected oracles, which suggest typological connections with their present situation, readers of prophetic texts were to look for typological connections among the various sections of prophetic books that suggest typological connections with their present situation" (29). Notably, Floyd argues, too, that the prophetic personages associated with prophetic books were at least imagined to have been real, historical prophets, who prophesied about real, historical events, in Israel's and Judah's pasts (31-35).

50 An exemplary work is David J. Mattingly, *Imperialism, Power, and Identity: Experiencing the Roman Empire* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011). For studies that make similar contributions, but with regard to the Persian period of the Near East, see, e.g., Elspeth R.M. Dussinberre, *Empire, Authority, and Autonomy in Achaemenid Anatolia* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013); Henry P. Colburn, "The Archaeology of Achaemenid Rule in Egypt" (Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, 2014); and idem, "The Sixth Satrapy: The Archaeology of Egypt under Achaemenid Rule," *Journal of Ancient Egyptian Interconnections* 5 (2013), 12-13 (a short summary of the dissertation). In biblical studies, see, e.g., Göran Eidevall, "Propagandistic Constructions of Empires in the Book of Isaiah," and Ehud Ben Zvi, "The Yehudite Collection of Prophetic Books and Imperial Contexts," both in *Divination, Politics, and Ancient Near Eastern Empires*, 109-28 and 145-69, respectively. Ben Zvi's work offers some preliminary observations about how Judean literati remembered and imagined empire, including the positive (though limited) portrayals of Persia, under which the Jerusalem temple was rebuilt, and the mixed (mostly negative, some positive) portrayals of Assyria and Babylon, the hubristic regimes that played crucial roles in the narratives of exile. Eidevall's study is mainly diachronic, in that he reconstructs different stages of development in the book of Isaiah that he sees as corresponding to different eras of Judah's historical existence under empire (Assyrian, Babylonian, and

ancient world and how these identities related to “discrepant experience” under imperial rule, as classicist David Mattingly phrases it.⁵¹ New archaeological and epigraphic studies of Persian-controlled Anatolia and Egypt, for example, are fine tuning what we know about imperial authority and local autonomy in those regions, showing how different sociocultural categories (e.g., the military, education, trade and consumption, worship of divinity, etc.) took various forms depending upon the specifics of sociopolitical contexts.⁵² Today, the claim that identities are discrepant or plural or multiform may be old hat, but how such identities are negotiated in any given context, at any given time, is not. With the abundance of new Persian-period archaeological data coming out of Israel (e.g., Ramat Rahel), and with more specific knowledge of how others experienced empire across the Near East, there is ample opportunity to make great gains in our work on ancient Judah. The prophetic literature and its discourses can and should play major parts in these investigations, alongside the newly available archaeological and epigraphic data.

In biblical studies there have been some important recent contributions along these lines. See, for example, the volumes authored and edited by scholars like Ehud Ben Zvi, Jon Berquist, Louis Jonker, and Oded Lipschits, among others. Also insightful are two recent collections in the Society of Biblical Literature’s ANEM series, both of which I have noted above, and both of which are open-access, online publications: *Political Memory in and after the Persian Period*, edited by Jason Silverman and Caroline Waerzeggers (<http://www.sbl-site.org/assets/pdfs/pubs/9780884140894_OA.pdf>); and *Divination, Politics, and Ancient Near Eastern Empires*, edited by Alan Lenzi and Jonathan Stökl (<http://www.sbl-site.org/assets/pdfs/pubs/9781589839984_OA.pdf>). Prophetic literature in particular is especially important for such study because it contains a discursive horizon that provides us access, however limited, to ancient Judean thinking about sociopolitical matters, past and future, and it thus shows us how these matters were brought into conversation, how the early Second Temple-period community responsible for the books “deliberated” over the issues, over the course of that era. No other corpus of Judean literature offers such rich, multivocal discourse.

In this essay I have focused on deliberation in the book of Isaiah over hopes for future rule, mostly with reference to David and the Davidic dynasty, but

Persian), but his concluding comments, which briefly offer a “macrostructural view” of the book, take steps toward the kind of approach I am advocating here (see 126-28).

51 See Mattingly, *Imperialism, Power, and Identity*, esp. 203-45.

52 See, e.g., Dusinberre, *Empire, Authority, and Autonomy*; and Colburn, “Archaeology of Achaemenid Rule.”

also with reference to other hopes. To put things in Mattingly's terms of identity, the book reflects a community, in which and for which the text emerged, that "discrepantly" identified with various future political hopes, and this political imaginary was related to "discrepant" memories of the community's political past. The better we understand the discrepant voices in the discourse and their interrelationship, the better we can understand the lives of the community and its political concerns, to which the text gives us some access. Our questions, though, should not focus exclusively on "top down" political interests, that is, issues of governance and administration, of royal and imperial regimes. To cite Mattingly again, we should attempt "to look at society from the top down, the bottom up, and sideways on."⁵³ In Isaiah, for example, we might investigate how the discourse presents deliberations over local wealth, status, and gender (see, e.g., the issues presented in Isa 3-4), alongside and in relation to its presentation of politics past and future, in the ancient Judean context and with reference to similar deliberations in the broader Persian imperial world. This sort of investigation would further illuminate our understandings of ancient Judah, and thus our ongoing reading of prophetic literature, with all its diverse politics.

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53 Mattingly, *Imperialism, Power, and Identity*, 273.

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