

ISRAEL AND OTHER NATIONS IN ISAIAH: THE DIACHRONIC PERSPECTIVE OF THE BOOK'S FINAL FORM

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There is no consensus about the relationship between Israel and the nations in the book called Isaiah.¹ Severino Croatto deconstructs the exegetical tradition that emphasizes the promise of universal salvation for “the nations”. The real message—scattered all along the book by its final author—is to affirm the liberation and return of the different Judean diasporas. The nations, on the contrary, will be punished.² His argument rests on the recognition that various expressions that appear to promise salvation to “the nations” actually speak of Jews in exile or the diaspora. By contrast, John Oswalt argues that Israel has a mission to the nations who will eventually join Israel in Jerusalem, where they will serve Israel and share in the worship of God.³ His argument rests on an investigation of statements concerning the nations throughout the book of Isaiah, arguing that “Israel’s relationship becomes the skeleton around which the book’s theology is structured”. Although both positions take a synchronic approach, they come to almost opposite conclusions. While Croatto uses a central exegetical insight to interpret a few key texts, however, Oswalt uses another crucial discovery to interpret the whole book in that light. Both studies have strengths, and both have weaknesses. Their strengths lie in the two key insights. Yet both assume that the synchronic level over-rules all previous editorial levels, and both treat “Israel” and “the nations” as if they were monolithic entities. On this basis, only complementary aspects of a small part of the complex and shifting relationships between Israel and other nations can be captured. In the following investigation, I will

¹ Cf., for example, James Chukwuma Okoye, *Israel and the Nations: A Mission Theology of the Old Testament*, American Society of Missiology Series; No. 39 (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2006), John N. Oswalt, "The Nations in Isaiah: Friend or Foe; Servant or Partner," *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 16, no. 1 (2006): 41-51, Markus Zehnder, *Umgang Mit Fremden in Israel und Assyrien: Ein Beitrag zur Anthropologie des "Fremden" im Licht antiker Quellen*, vol. 168, *Beiträge zur Wissenschaft vom Alten und Neuen Testament* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2005), with J. S. Croatto, "The "Nations" in the Salvific Oracles of Isaiah," *Vetus Testamentum* 55, no. 2 (2004): 143-161, Philipp Enger, *Die Adoptivkinder Abrahams: Eine exegetische Spurensuche zur Vorgeschichte des Proselytentums*, *Beiträge zur Erforschung des Alten Testaments und des antiken Judentums* (Frankfurt a. M.: Peter Lang, 2006), on the other.

² J. S. Croatto, "Isaiah 40–55," in *Global Bible Commentary*, ed. D. Patte (Nashville: Abingdon, 2004), 195-200, J. S. Croatto, "The "Nations" in the Salvific Oracles of Isaiah," *Vetus Testamentum* 55 (2005): 143-161.

³ J. N. Oswalt, "The Nations in Isaiah: Friend or Foe; Servant or Partner," *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 16 (2006): 41-51.

attempt to draw on the strengths of both while avoiding their weaknesses. I will draw attention to two characteristics in Isaiah that have until now had little influence on the study of our subject: (1) the diachronic nature of the book's final form and (2) the fact that both "the nations" and "Israel" are not monolithic entities, but used in various ways in the book.

1 Synchronicity, Diachronicity and Eschatology in Isaiah

In the book's final form, synchronicity and diachronicity depend on each other because the book called Isaiah has been edited over several centuries to reach its final, canonical form. Carefully edited materials that have been almost seamlessly integrated with each other stand side-by-side with portions where apparently conflicting materials are juxtaposed with little or no mediation. The book is composed in such a way that diachronicity is written into the synchronic level of its final form.

The book of Isaiah is "diachronic" in two distinct understandings of the concept. First, the book is "diachronic" in the sense that statements which originated at different historical periods are interwoven throughout. This is the usual sense in which "diachronic" is employed in the academic study of biblical texts. Second, the book is "diachronic" in the sense that all parts of the book contain statements that are acutely aware of a divine plan that can be traced through events from the past, is being fine-tuned in the authors' or editors' present and will be worked out *in various ways* through *several* periods in the future. There is, then, an acute sense of past, present and various alternative futures in the book.

There are different kinds of references to the future in Isaiah. Some are more "eschatological" than others, referring to different time-spans in the future. "Eschatology" concerns the "eschaton", the time of the end. In the book of Isaiah, however, the eschaton itself is layered, and it is therefore better to speak of "end times" in the plural. Many statements about the future, often in the form of small, self-contained but similar subunits, stand side-by-side in the editorial arrangement of the final form of the book. "Eschatology" in Isaiah, then, is multi-layered on two counts. First, there are different levels of awareness about the "eschatological" import of editorial comments about events of the future, a sliding scale of "eschatological consciousness" on behalf of the various editors who introduced them. Second, and partly dependent on the first point, various statements refer to different kinds of future scenarios that are not necessarily envisaged as happening at the same time or even as being connected through direct causality (other than that God is envisaged as the originator of these events). A full investigation of all future references in the book of Isaiah with a view to this layered eschatology is urgently needed, but lies outside the scope of this paper. Below we will present some case-studies to support the

hypotheses presented in the preceding paragraphs. The following examples show that the pervasive eschatological ambiguity in Isaiah owes much to the practicalities of editorial work during the formative period of the book, which extended over several centuries.⁴

2 Canonical Shaping, Editorial Inconsistencies and the Nature of Editorial Processes in Isaiah

Following the publication of Duhm's ground-breaking commentary on Isaiah in 1892,⁵ there has been a tendency through most of the 20th century to see numerous editorial strands with conflicting theologies in the book of Isaiah.⁶ More recently, Childs and others have developed a "canonical approach" to the interpretation of Isaiah, in which the final form of the book over-rides all previous editorial levels. While previous editorial levels, visible through what Childs called "editorial seams" or "traces", are important for the canonical approach, they mainly serve to cast the "canonical intention(s)" of the final redactor(s) into sharper focus and so help to highlight the theological profile of the final form of the text.⁷ However, the final form of the book of Isaiah contains so many rough edges that this view is less than convincing. The book's final form is not an editorially polished monolith. Rather, it contains finely-honed sections side-by-side with materials in their raw state. As just one example of many who could illustrate this point, let us look at 7:21-22:

On that day one will keep alive a young cow and two sheep, and will eat curds because of the abundance of milk that they give; for everyone that is left in the land shall eat curds and honey.

These two verses belong to a series of oracles (7:18-19, 20, 21-22, 23-24). Since each is introduced by the phrase "on that day", usually an eschatological formula, they are often considered "eschatological". Childs, also following the eschatological line, suggests that "[s]ome of the complexity of the final form of the passage (sc. 7:18-24) lies in the exegetical activity of those editorial tradents of the Isaianic tradition who struggled in response to the coercion of the text for further understanding of God's purpose with Israel". On 7:21-22 he writes:

In v. 21 the devastation is such that a man struggles for a subsistence level of life with a young cow and two sheep. Yet at this point, the meaning of the imagery shifts. These few pitiful animals produce such an abundance of milk that all those survivors who are left now feast on

⁴ See also my discussion on eschatology in the Old Testament in Knut M. Heim, "The (God-)Forsaken King of Psalm 89: A Historical and Intertextual Enquiry," in *King and Messiah in Israel and the Ancient Near East*, ed. J. Day (Sheffield, Eng: Sheffield Univ Pr, 1998), 296-322., here 303-304.

⁵ Bernhard Duhm, *Das Buch Jesaia* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1892), Bernhard Duhm, *Das Buch Jesaia*, 5. Aufl. ed. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck u. Ruprecht, 1968).

⁶ See, for example, the articles by O. Steck.

⁷ See the various works of Childs, Seitz and others.

curds and honey”.⁸

I would like to take issue with this line of interpretation on several counts: First, it is clear that not all of the “eschatological” formulae refer to an unspecified “end time” of peace, liberty and justice for Israel. Here, for example, the phrase refers to a specific time of judgment for Judah through an Assyrian invasion in the *foreseeable* future. This suggest that such formulae are either not eschatological at all,⁹ or it supports my point made earlier, that “eschatology” in Isaiah (and elsewhere in the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible) is multi-layered. The oracles in this section refer, so to speak, to *different* eschatological periods. Second, Child’s language betrays how difficult he finds it to integrate this passage with his overall approach. Terms like “complexity” and “struggled in response to the coercion of the text for further understanding” point not so much to the labours of the canonical editors, but to his own. Third, the highlighted sections in the quote from Childs highlight that this particular oracle is not what it is made out to be by Childs and others. It is not another oracle of judgment which, by means of strenuous editorial activity, is made to shift into an eschatological promise of future bliss. Verse 21, supposedly the “judgment” part of the oracle, is simply too short to act as such. Rather, the whole of verses 21-22 is a promise of divine help. It has been added *in its raw form* to introduce a glimmer of hope in the midst of the surrounding oracles of doom. It introduces a vision of supernatural abundance in the midst of divine judgment. 7:21-22 are indeed an editorial addition that enhances the final form of the book of Isaiah in its canonical shape. However, within the series of the surrounding oracles, this “counter-oracle” stands out like a sore thumb.

Due to the limited scope of the present study, the discussion of 7:21-22 in the preceding paragraphs can only serve as a case study. However, it is clear that there are numerous other cases where similar circumstances exist in the book of Isaiah. To mention just one more example, the “Oracle concerning Damascus” in 17:1–14 (discussed in detail below), probably related to the period of the Syro-Ephraimite crisis, contains three subsections (17:4-6, 7-8, 9-11), all of which are introduced by the eschatological formula “on that day”. In this context, 17:7-8 is an editorial addition that constitutes an eschatological word of hope in stark contrast with the surrounding sections in vv. 4-6 and 9-11.

Again, no effort has been made to integrate it with the surrounding material. Childs’ comments are instructive. He writes: “the *pattern of shifting without mediation* from judgment to eschatological salvation *is used so frequently* as an

⁸ B. S. Childs, *Isaiah: A Commentary*, Old Testament Library (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 68; emphases added.

⁹ So, e.g., John D. W. Watts, *Isaiah 1-33*, Word Biblical Commentary; V. 24 (Waco, Tex.: Word Books, 1985), 106.

editorial technique...that it tends to support a redactional shaping of the larger passage”.¹⁰ Again the highlighted sections reveal a lot. First, Childs points out that the state of affairs described in our two examples are very frequent in Isaiah. This supports my earlier claim that editorial inconsistencies are frequent in Isaiah. Second, Childs is making a virtue out of necessity when he calls the stark juxtaposition of judgment oracles and “eschatological” oracles a “pattern of shifting without mediation”. More likely, such repeated juxtapositions are not evidence of an “editorial technique”, as Childs calls it, but rather point to a lack of editorial efforts in the first place. This is not to say that there is no editorial shaping in the book of Isaiah. Quite the opposite, I believe that Childs is correct in his overall assessment of canonical shaping in the book of Isaiah and elsewhere in the Bible.

However, I would like to suggest that examples like the ones just seen show that canonical shaping, at least in the book called Isaiah, did not aim for absolute editorial consistency. The main problem for the canonical approach of Childs and his followers are the uneven results of the proposed editorial process(es) evident in the biblical text of Isaiah itself. On the one hand, very sophisticated editorial activity has shaped various parts of the book of Isaiah into a larger whole. On the other hand, there are the kinds of editorial inconsistencies just described, as well as the very roughshod transitions between major parts of the book, for example the way in which chapters 36–39 are positioned between chapters 1–35 and chapters 40–66 or the abrupt way in which Isaiah 40, with its focus on the return from exile in the sixth century, follows the biographical court materials of the 8th century King Hezekiah.¹¹ Similarly, why is there no narrative account of the exile of the Northern Kingdom to Assyria, perhaps similar to chapters 36–39? Perhaps a brief editorial gloss is trying to remedy this perceived gap in the historical record. The phrase “within 65 years Ephraim will be shattered, no longer a people” in Isaiah 7:8—marked as an editorial comment in NRSV by means of brackets—is one of a number of references to specific time-scales (see also 23:15: seventy years) that introduce a mid-term diachronic perspective. It seems to be quite obvious in its interruption of the flow of vv. 8-9, and should not be understood as a deliberate attempt to “deceive” readers but more as a way of introducing a gloss into the text that was meant to be quite obvious. This seems to be an example of a short editorial gloss due to lack of space, which may explain why the frequent editorial technique of using the phrase “on that day” was not employed in this instance, and then the phrase was subsequently simply copied as part of the main text in its unaltered form.

¹⁰ Childs, *Isaiah*, 137; emphases added.

¹¹ But cf. the fundamental critique of sophisticated editing in the Pentateuch and the Historical Books of the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible proposed by John Van Seters, *The Edited Bible: The Curious History of the "Editor" in Biblical Criticism* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2006).

The book of Isaiah, then, contains numerous instances of editorial additions that have been integrated with their context in varying degrees of sophistication. In a recent study of Isaiah, Blenkinsopp stated:

The history of the interpretation of Isaiah begins in the book itself... We can detect throughout the book an ongoing process of commentary and supplementation, of cumulative and incremental interpretive activity, until the point is reached where such activity had to be carried on outside the book, in the form of commentary on it.¹²

But how did such editing happen practically, and who were the people that did the editing? – Works like Isaiah in its various editorial stages would have been read by the few and heard read in public by the many. Even fewer individuals had the inclination to or the means of owning such materials. The most likely owners would have been the temple in Jerusalem, the royal court and the more important synagogues in Judah and the diaspora, with important priests and scribes situated at the temple and/or the court having the motivation, the means and the opportunity to commit the editorial deed.

Substantial pieces of writing, like the book of Isaiah in its various incarnations, were committed to “scrolls”, in the form of sheets of papyrus or animal skin (parchment) that were sown together to produce long panels of about 20-30cm height and up to several meters width that were then rolled up for easy storage.¹³ In the light of the editorial inconsistencies observed above, I would like to propose a sketch of how various kinds of editorial activities may have led to the final form of the book as we now have it.

There is a fundamental difference between modern and even medieval literature on the one hand and ancient literature on the other: “ancient texts were primarily written to be heard, not seen”.¹⁴ Ancient reading practice was to read texts out loud, whether they were read by individuals or to an audience. Furthermore, ancient writing materials, especially papyrus and parchment, were expensive and therefore writers and copyist, for financial reasons, generally put as much writing on a given writing surface as possible. This led to two consequences. (1) Authors, editors and copyists wrote biblical texts continuously, without breaks or spaces between sentences or paragraphs or even larger sections that might have visually presented a

¹² Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Opening the Sealed Book: Interpretations of the Book of Isaiah in Late Antiquity* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2006), 7.

¹³ See Emanuel Tov, "The Writing of Early Scrolls and the Literary Analysis of Hebrew Scripture," *Dead Sea Discoveries* 13, no. 3 (2006): 339-347. For fuller discussions of the technical aspects of writing on early scrolls, see Emanuel Tov, *Scribal Practices and Approaches Reflected in the Texts Found in the Judean Desert*, *Studies on the Texts of the Desert of Judah*, V. 54 (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2004).

¹⁴ David A. Dorsey, *The Literary Structure of the Old Testament: A Commentary on Genesis-Malachi* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1999), 15-16.

text's structure, as most modern printed materials do. (2) Ancient writers, authors, editors, glossators, copyists and readers were forced to use *audible* means to explain the relationships between the various parts of the text on the page. "Signals were geared for the ear, not the eye, since visual markers would be of little value to a listening audience".¹⁵ There were no italics or underlinings to highlight words, no brackets to mark interpolations, no footnotes or text-boxes for additional explanatory materials. Instead, lines ran on and on, filling column after column from top to bottom and from side to side without large margins and other spaces that could have served to deposit longer editorial additions.¹⁶ This does not mean, however, that ancient texts contained no means to mark such materials. For example, sophisticated combinations of repetition and variation could act as structural markers. Word order reversal and repetition acted to highlight specific words or parts of a sentence.

We may therefore draw an analogy from audible *structural* markers to audible *interpretative* markers and reconstruct possible scenarios for the various editorial activities. (1) To save space, editorial additions were often kept to brief glosses and bare editorial additions themselves, without elegant literary padding that would have integrated the new materials smoothly into their immediate contexts on the page. (2) interpretative comments and contextual links may have been provided by the readers through intonation and side-remarks during reading. (3) Many such materials were later simply included where they seemed to fit when less skilled scribes mechanically copied the work onto a new scroll. (4) Larger additions and more elegant editorial adjustments were added where there was scope to do so when skilled editors were involved in the process of copying whole works onto new writing materials.

Evidence in support of these hypotheses can be found through tracing editorial activities in the writings from Qumran. Emauel Tov reached similar conclusions in his recent study of scribal practices in the writing of Qumran scrolls. Summarizing his findings, he states:

[A]ssuming that the external shape of the earliest scrolls of Hebrew Scripture was no different from that of the Qumran scrolls, we set out to analyze the procedures for writing and rewriting ancient scrolls. We noted that the inscribed area in scrolls was not a flexible entity. In fact, after the scroll was inscribed, there simply was no technical possibility for a scribe to insert any substantial addition into the text or to delete or rewrite segments larger than a few words or a line. We therefore suggested that editors or scribes did not use earlier copies as the basis for their content changes, but instead, constantly created fresh scrolls for expressing their new thoughts. ... *Each layer of rewriting probably*

¹⁵ Ibid., 16.

¹⁶ Ibid., 15.

*involved the penning of a new copy. This hypothesis involves the further assumption of linear development of Scripture books and probably also the depositing, writing, and rewriting of Scripture scrolls in a central place, viz., the Temple.*¹⁷

These suggestions go some way in explaining the uneven distribution of highly integrated editorial sections interspersed with less sophisticated ones. The previous paragraphs, then, explain why those who shaped the book of Isaiah into its final, canonical form did not only leave subtle traces of their editorial work in the shape of editorial seams, but much more obvious signs of diachronic development. Texts such as the ones discussed above, and dozens upon dozens more, show *overt* signs of development, editorial patches sown on in bright colours to signal development, ambiguity and thus openness of signification—an invitation for creative interpretation if ever there was one. In the words missing from Tov's comment quoted above, he mentions that since the realia of rewriting were beyond the scholarly horizon in the past, the new understanding of the editorial processes should now be taken into consideration in the historico-critical analysis of Hebrew Scripture.¹⁸ In the remainder of this paper we intend to do just that.

3 Diachronicity and the Relationships between Israel and other Nations in Isaiah

The following consideration of diachronic aspects all contribute to our understanding of the changing relationships between Israel and other nations. The examples are all highly sophisticated editorial schemes.

3.1 The "Former Things" in Isaiah

There are a range of texts that seem to relate former things to the present and/or the future, namely Isaiah 37:26-27; 40:27–41:4; 41:21-29; 42:9; 43:8-13; 43:15-21; 44:6-8; 44:26 - 45:1; 46:8-11; 48:3-8; 48:14-16; 65:16-17. Note that all but the first and the last of these appear in Second Isaiah. A thorough examination of all these texts is an urgent desideratum, but lies outside the scope of the present study. Instead, we will use 41:21-29 as a case study to illustrate the synchronic purpose of these diachronic features in the text. Isaiah 41:21-29, with the God of Israel addressing rival gods, reads:

Set forth your case, says the LORD; bring your proofs, says the King of

¹⁷ Tov, "The Writing of Early Scrolls and the Literary Analysis of Hebrew Scripture.", 347; emphases added.

¹⁸ Cf. also Peter Höffken, "The Isaiah Scroll and the Composition of the Book of Isaiah," in *Qumran between the Old and New Testaments*, ed. Frederick H. Cryer and Thomas L. Thompson, *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament. Supplement Series* (Sheffield, Eng.: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 151-158.

Jacob. Let them bring them, and tell us what is to happen. Tell us the former things, what they are, so that we may consider them, and that we may know their outcome; or declare to us the things to come. Tell us what is to come hereafter, that we may know that you are gods; do good, or do harm, that we may be afraid and terrified. You, indeed, are nothing and your work is nothing at all; whoever chooses you is an abomination. I stirred up one from the north, and he has come, from the rising of the sun, *one who calls on my name*.¹⁹ He shall trample on rulers as on mortar, as the potter treads clay. Who declared it from the beginning, so that we might know, and beforehand, so that we might say, "He is right"? There was no one who declared it, none who proclaimed, none who heard your words. I first have declared it to Zion, and I give to Jerusalem a herald of good tidings. But when I look there is no one; among these there is no counselor who, when I ask, gives an answer. No, they are all a delusion; their works are nothing; their images are empty wind.

Verse 25 presents a specific example of “former things”, prophecies originally given by the God of Israel to Isaiah of Jerusalem that are now seen to have been fulfilled. As Childs noted, “the description of God’s ‘stirring up’ Cyrus from the north (41:25) picks up the same verb used in 13:17, ‘I am stirring up the Medes’”.²⁰ In other words, the overthrow of the Babylonian empire at the hands of Cyrus the Mede is seen as the fulfillment of a prophetic word from the past, preserved in First Isaiah but supposedly first uttered over a century earlier by Isaiah of Jerusalem.²¹

In this and the other passages, the issue at stake is whether it is the Lord or whether it is other gods who control past, present and future events. Consequently, they are regularly set in the forensic language of lawsuits in which the Lord presents his case for superiority to the other gods and/or their worshippers. The argument again and again turns on evidence surrounding one central issue: Who has foretold in the past what has now or is now or will soon come to pass? – The answer to this question, so the reasoning of these passages goes, determines which deity is in control of events and thus more worthy of worship than the others. Beyond such “trials” of other gods and the question of religious adherence, however, a more profound question is

¹⁹ Italics here indicate that I have followed the Masoretic text, against NRSV’s conjecture (following an ingenious but unnecessary emendation by Elliger (see Childs, *Isaiah*, 321 and John Goldingay, *The Message of Isaiah 40-55: A Literary-Theological Commentary* (London; New York: T&T Clark, 2005), 144).

²⁰ B. S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (London: SCM Press, 1979), 330, cited in C. R. Seitz, *Zion's Final Destiny: The Development of the Book of Isaiah: A Reassessment of Isaiah 36–39* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 43 n. 27. See now also Childs, *Isaiah*, 322-323 and John Goldingay and David F. Payne, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Isaiah 40-55*, 2 vols., *International Critical Commentary on the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments* (London; New York: T&T Clark, 2006), vol. 1, 200.

²¹ See Seitz, *Zion's Destiny*, 41-45.

answered for the suffering, doubting and hesitant exiles. They are comforted, their election is confirmed and their hope for an imminent return from exile is kindled.²² The present time of crisis and decision is part of God's long-term planning, and present circumstances can be understood in the light of Israel's history (the past) and final destiny (the future).

Just one more example of a potential former prophecy—Isaiah of Jerusalem's prophecy to Hezekiah concerning the exile to Babylon in Isaiah 39—may illustrate the point further. Melugin suggested that this passage is the closest thing to a setting for Isaiah 40–55, a redactor placing the material of Second Isaiah next to the last concrete historical reference in the book of Isaiah as it then existed.²³ Seitz, agreeing with Melugin on this point, concluded:

Why is there so substantial a book associated with the prophet Isaiah? The answer would turn on the fulfillment of the divine word. Why?—because Isaiah spoke of the future assault on Zion by Babylon (39:5-7), and because he also spoke of God's abiding protection over that same Zion (37:35). The first was fulfilled, allowing God to speak again from the divine counsel about a judgment that had been rendered (40:2). Concerning the second there were serious questions, but here too the “former things” were the witness to which the prophet turned to defend the cause of Zion (44:26).²⁴

Isaiah 42:9, “See, the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare; before they spring forth, I tell you of them” could thus be a theme-verse for the line of argument used in these passages, and because they are set forth as evidence for God's control over Israel's destiny, the exiles addressed in Isaiah 40–55 are encouraged to heed the prophetic summons to make ready for their imminent return to the homeland, for Israel's God “confirms the word of his servant, and fulfills the prediction of his messengers”. He “says of Jerusalem, ‘It shall be inhabited’, and of the cities of Judah, ‘They shall be rebuilt, and I will raise up their ruins’” (44:26). The argument presented in all of these passages hinges on a diachronic dimension in the text, and the importance of this diachronic dimension cannot be underestimated., “[T]he corpus of Second Isaiah presupposes that of First Isaiah,” not just editorially, in the sense that it comes first in the book (synchronic level), but historically (diachronic level). The prophecies of First Isaiah that are now being fulfilled were given long ago, by Isaiah of Jerusalem, and it is this diachronic level that plays the crucial role in Second Isaiah's argument.²⁵ But if so much editing was going on, how could the recipients of

²² Cf. Childs, *Isaiah*, 317.

²³ R. F. Melugin, *The Formation of Isaiah 40–55*, vol. 141, *Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1976), 177.

²⁴ Seitz, *Zion's Destiny*, 45.

²⁵ Cf. Childs, *Isaiah*, 322 and H. G. M. Williamson, *The Book Called Isaiah: Deutero-Isaiah's Role in Composition and Redaction* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 2-3.

the message and the readers of the book know that such “ancient” prophecies were really as old as they were said to be? – The book of Isaiah itself provides an eloquent answer.

3.2 The “Sealed Book” in Isaiah

The first reference to the production and “sealing” of prophetic utterances in written form is Isaiah 8:16-17: “Bind up the testimony, seal the teaching among my disciples. I will wait for the LORD, who is hiding his face from the house of Jacob, and I will hope in him”. Note the reference to waiting and the prophet’s hope that is grounded on the existence of the sealed teaching that is to be kept by his disciples. In a similar situation where the prophet’s message is rejected again, Isaiah is also directed to write it down—on a tablet, the most durable writing surface—so that it will be preserved for the time of the message’s fulfillment: “Go now, write it before them on a tablet, and inscribe it in a book, so that it may be for the time to come as a witness forever” (30:8). Blenkinsopp comments on the relationship between the two passages:

“Isaiah confided his testimonies and teachings to his disciples in order to guarantee the authenticity of the predictions they contained after the failure of his first incursion into Judean foreign affairs (Isa 8:16). This written copy is called a “testimony” (*ἰσχυρισμὸς*), an indication that predictive prophecies could take on a quasilegal status when written and notarized for purposes of authentication, comparable to the prophetic “witness” written in a “book” alluded to at Isa 30:8-11”.²⁶

After his first intervention in international politics failed to alter political and religious behaviour, Isaiah was told to preserve the message in writing and charge his disciples to keep his prophetic teachings in sealed form in the expectation of the eventual vindication of their truth and relevance. – But why a *sealed* book? Important documents, such as legal contracts, etc. were sealed with wax or clay to avoid tampering and some would require validation by witnesses, like the tablet on which Isaiah was told to write “Belonging to Maher-shalal-hash-baz” (8:1-2).

Isaiah 29:11-12 reads:

The vision of all this has become for you like the words of a sealed document. If it is given to those who can read, with the command, “Read this,” they say, “We cannot, for it is sealed.” And if it is given to those who cannot read, saying, “Read this,” they say, “We cannot read.”

Blenkinsopp concludes:

sealing a predictive prophecy had the purpose of providing irrefutable proof of its authenticity, and therefore its divine origin, at the time of fulfillment. When that happened, and the prophet was sure that it would,

²⁶ Blenkinsopp, *Opening the Sealed Book: Interpretations of the Book of Isaiah in Late Antiquity*, 6.

the situation envisaged in 29:11-12 would be reversed. The book would be unsealed and its meaning would become clear to those now capable of hearing and understanding”.²⁷

His point is well supported by a quotation of the following passage, from Isaiah 29:18: “On that day the deaf shall hear the words of a scroll, and out of their gloom and darkness the eyes of the blind shall see”. Since there are only two references to a sealed document in Isaiah, “it seems likely that the sealed ‘vision of all these things’ is a reference to Isaiah’s sealed testimony confided to his disciples. . . . The passage about the sealed book, therefore, deals with the reception or nonreception of *written* prophecy”.²⁸ Blenkinsopp rightly concludes: “The history of the interpretation of Isaiah begins in the book itself”.²⁹

Initially, as Blenkinsopp has suggested, the passage concerns Israel’s inability to grasp the prophetic message, but its real point can only be understood against the background of the whole book of Isaiah.³⁰ Recognizing its secondary nature (a prose addition to the preceding poetic material), he suggests that “these addenda are attached to and are generated by reflection on existing prophetic sayings, updating earlier pronouncements in light of later situations, creating in effect new prophecy out of old”.³¹ Blenkinsopp noted that the passage may be seen simply as another way of expressing, through the metaphor of a sealed book, the incomprehension of the public confronted with the prophet’s oral message”. But since the book of Isaiah as a whole is presented as a “vision” (וִיזוֹן), the expression “the vision (וִיזוֹן) of all this” may allude to the book of Isaiah in whatever shape it existed at the time of writing.³²

The statement in 48:16: “Draw near to me, hear this! From the beginning I have not spoken in secret, from the time it came to be I have been there. And now the Lord GOD has sent me and his spirit” may seem to contradict the preceding argument. However, the point of “sealing” the prophetic teachings was not to keep them secret, but to preserve them in unaltered form and so to prove that the predictive prophecy contained in them had been fulfilled at a later time.

4 “Israel” and the Other Nations in the Book Called Isaiah

Designations for “Israel” and references to other nations are employed by all sections of Isaiah in various ways and with various meanings. “Israel” in the book of Isaiah

²⁷ Ibid., 14.

²⁸ Ibid., 13; emphasis original.

²⁹ Ibid., 7.

³⁰ Ibid., 9.

³¹ Ibid.9.Cf. Childs’ comment, “divine revelation has now been carefully related to the vehicle of a written scroll. The effect of hardening is that Israel can no longer understand its scriptures. Certainly this development would indicate a later stage in the history of the text’s growth” (Childs, *Isaiah*, 218).

³² Blenkinsopp, *Opening the Sealed Book: Interpretations of the Book of Isaiah in Late Antiquity*, 11-12.

can sometimes refer to the Northern Kingdom, sometimes to the Southern Kingdom of Judah, sometimes to smaller groups of people within Judah, and perhaps even to individuals (servant songs). In the light of these observations, Paul's statement may serve as a comment on the view of Israel in the book of Isaiah: [Ο]ὐ γὰρ πάντες οἱ ἐξ Ἰσραὴλ οὗτοι Ἰσραήλ: "For not all Israelites truly belong to Israel" (Romans 9:6).³³ Similarly, while various nations in Isaiah are usually treated as enemies of Israel and of God, this is not the whole picture. There are surprisingly positive statements about the nations, even in those sections that are generally considered to be most negative. We will treat some instances of these circumstances in detail (following Croatto's methodological lead of dealing with specific texts in detail), but keeping in mind that the examples studied here are representative of the book as a whole (following Oswalt's methodological lead about the significance of the larger context for understanding specific texts against a larger whole). In addition, we will take full account of the importance of the diachronic character of the various parts of the book as well as the editorial complexity of their relationships. Due to the limited scope of this paper, only a few texts can be studied to serve as test-cases for a more comprehensive study.

4.1 "Israel" in the Book of Isaiah

While the book of Isaiah is clearly written with a focus on Judah (1:1), the Northern Kingdom of Israel is always included in its outlook, and its ultimate horizon is global. There are different designations for various parts of Israel and its constituent parts, especially the Northern Kingdom with its capital in Samaria and Judah, the Southern Kingdom with its capital in Jerusalem. Significantly, many of these designations and many of the statements about Israel/Judah are highly critical and there are numerous statements which threaten various kinds of divine judgment upon Israel/Judah that are comparable to God's judgment on other nations, see, for example, below on the "Oracles concerning the Nations".

One of the most striking features of the book of Isaiah is the strongly negative attitude towards Israel/Judah with which the book begins. Israel is likened three times to Sodom and Gomorrah, the quintessentially wicked and sinful cities of the plain that were utterly destroyed through divine judgment (1:9,10; 3:9). Even more strikingly, Israel shares this ignominious distinction with its archenemy Babylon (13:19), the only other nation that is likened to Sodom and Gomorrah in Isaiah. The first six chapters are a series of almost uninterrupted indictments of Israel/Judah, leading to the sarcastic and accusatory song of the vineyard in Isaiah 5 and culminating in Isaiah

³³ Unless indicated, English translations of biblical texts will be from the NRSV.

6 with the divine commission to the prophet Isaiah to stop the ears and to blind the eyes of Israel/Judah through his message so as to make the impending divine judgment inevitable. Note in this regard the refrain “for all this his anger has not turned away, and his hand is stretched out still” (5:25; 9:11, 16, 20; 10:4), which links the judgmental tenor of chapters 1–6 with the same attitude in chapters 7–10. It is through the theme of judgment upon Israel/Judah that God’s people are brought into a universal perspective. This is first expressed in the opening address of the book, “Hear, O heavens, and listen, O earth!” which calls upon the whole created order to witness God’s lawsuit against his people (1:2).

Note in this regard the recurrence of the address to the heavens and the earth, including mountains, in 44:23; 49:13. In these later appeals, the universe is called upon to witness how God redeems exiled Israel. Thus both the divine judgment and the divine redemption of Israel are set in a universal context.³⁴ The severity of the divine judgment is based on the nature of God, “the Holy one of Israel” (1:4): The holiness attributed to the Lord by the Seraphim in 6:3 becomes “the criterion by which the sins of the people are measured and appear particularly grave: the more holy God is, the greater the sins against God”.³⁵

In some contexts, such as the passages dealing with the so-called Syro-Ephraimite crisis (Isaiah 7–8), the term “Israel” (often in parallel or exchangeable with “Ephraim” and in conjunction with references to Samaria as its capital city) relates exclusively to the Northern Kingdom, in opposition to the Southern Kingdom of Judah. Otherwise, names such as “Israel” and “Jacob” refer to a theological entity, the people of God.³⁶ Here the two diachronic dimensions of the book of Isaiah (see above) come to the fore again. Some texts which use “Israel” or “Jacob” or both as designations for the people of God as a whole (whether this includes “survivors” from the Northern Kingdom or not) are written from a historical perspective after the year 722, when the Northern Kingdom had ceased to exist. The “whole” people of God in this view would primarily be Judeans, for they were the only ones in existence, from a political perspective at least. Other such texts point to an indefinite time in the future, when the “people of God” as a whole would live securely in their land. A relatively small contingent of survivors from the Northern Kingdom would be thought to be

³⁴ In 13:13 there is a universal aspect to the divine judgment. The Lord’s sovereignty over everything, often as evidence for his ability to save Israel, is grounded in his creation of the heavens and the earth in 40:22; 44:24; 45:12; 48:13; 51:6, 13, 16; cf. also 50:2-3. Salvation for Israel is brought about by the Lord’s use of heaven and earth as instruments in 45:8. In 55:9 heaven and earth are illustrations to highlight that God’s mercy upon Israel’s sins is greater than Israel can imagine. New heavens and a new earth are the realm in which redeemed Israel will dwell according to 65:17.

³⁵ R. G. Kratz, “Israel in the Book of Isaiah,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 31 (2006): 103-128., here 110. The divine epithet is frequent throughout the books, see the comprehensive listing *ibid.*, 105, notes 5 and 6.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 111-112.

included in many of these passages. An interesting text in question, however, is 11:12-13:

He will raise a signal for the nations, and will assemble the outcasts of Israel, and gather the dispersed of Judah from the four corners of the earth. The jealousy of Ephraim shall depart, the hostility of Judah shall be cut off; Ephraim shall not be jealous of Judah, and Judah shall not be hostile towards Ephraim.

While the whole of the passage is “eschatological” in the sense that it refers to a time in the future that will be positive for Israel/Judah, verse 13 reckons with a continued existence of the northern and southern parts of Israel as distinct entities. Is this a sign that the text is not only eschatological, but also early? It would seem so, contrary to scholarly custom, which dictates that all things “eschatological” be late.³⁷ The big question in this regard is: Why should there be such a hope if the Northern Kingdom had long since ceased to exist?

4.2 The Nations in the Book of Isaiah: Isaiah 13–23 as Test-case

The most frequent references to other nations or ethnic groups in Isaiah are expressions referring to the main political powers that dominated the ancient Near East during the periods in which the various parts of the book of Isaiah were written. The first of these is Egypt in the south, the other two are Assyria and Babylon in the north-east of Israel. Next, there is a host of references to the many smaller “nations” that surrounded Israel. Then there are various expressions which denote specific parts of such nations. Finally, there are various kinds of references to “nations” in the plural, which perhaps designate all nations or significant parts of the majority of nations on earth.

Although the oracles in Isaiah 13–23 are grouped together, the connections between them are minimal. Nevertheless, with Childs and Seitz I see the whole section as the product of (a) later canonical redactor(s) who shaped the whole collection into a unified whole:

From the perspective of the event of 587, of the exile, and of the rise of the Medes and Persians, the significance of Israel’s history in reference to the world powers of Assyria and Babylon was interpreted retrospectively as consisting of the one theological purpose of God with his people.³⁸

³⁷ E.g., Childs, *Isaiah*, 104-105.

³⁸ Childs, *Isaiah*., 116.

In all but one of the superscriptions to the various oracles, they are called **נִשְׂא**, a technical term for a prophetic oracle.³⁹ It is possible that the term refers specifically to a judgment oracle (the literal meaning of the Hebrew word elsewhere is “burden”). Since the nations are normally not addressed directly, this is unlikely. However, the sombre overtones of “burden” may be designed to evoke the expectation, entirely justified throughout this section, of an ominous and threatening future for the nations to be mentioned in these oracles.

The oracles concern the following nations or ethnicities: Babylon (13:1–14:27), Philistines (14:28–32), Moab (15:1–16:14), Syria and the Northern Kingdom of Israel (17:1–14), Ethiopia (18:1–7; with **הִנֵּי**, “alas” [a lament formula] instead of **נִשְׂא**), Egypt (19:1–15, with prose appendices in 19:16–17, 18, 19–22, 23, 24 and 20:1–6), Babylon (21:1–10),⁴⁰ Dumah (21:11–12; probably an oasis in the north central desert of Arabia, modern al-Jauf), Arabia (21:13–17),⁴¹ Judah (22:1–25)⁴² and Tyre (23:1–18).⁴³ Most of these oracles, in fact all those who concern or *pretend* to address nations other than Israel, are not directed *against* them, but speak *about* the nations to an Israelite audience. They are oracles *about* the nations rather than oracles *against* or *to* them. Their main function is to encourage Israel by showing that major world affairs, including the fate of rival neighbours and the leading and most aggressive nations of the day, are under the control of the Lord. Significantly, most of the oracles contain editorial statements, clearly recognizable as such, which alter their significance and contribute to the overall message on the synchronic level of the book’s final form.

There are three significant factors pertaining to editorial statements in the oracles concerning the nations that support the main thesis of this paper. (1) Several of the oracles about the other nations include positive statements about Israel/Judah. (2) While the predictive prophecies about the various nations are largely negative, as one would expect, many of them include additional (editorial) statements of a positive

³⁹ See 13:1; 14:28; 15:1; 17:1; 19:1; 21:1; 21:11; 21:13; 22:1; 22:25; 23:1; 30:6; 46:1, 2; cf. also Zech 9:1; 12:1.

⁴⁰ The oracle—apparently concerning “the wilderness of the sea”—departs from the usual manner of naming the entity to which the oracle refers at the beginning. Ingeniously, it is not until v. 9 that Babylon is mentioned. See also the footnote on Judah, 22:1, below.

⁴¹ As with the oracles concerning Babylon and Juda (see above and below), this oracle mentions a somewhat cryptic location, the “desert plain”, as its topic. References to “Seir”, “Dedanites” and “Kedar” suggest various locations and ethnicities in Arabia.

⁴² As with the oracle concerning Babylon (see above), this oracle is initially marked as being concerned with a cryptic entity, the “valley of vision”. It is not until v. 8 that Judah is identified as the oracle’s topic. Its departure from the usual manner of naming the entity to which the oracle refers at the beginning brings it into an editorial connection with the oracle concerning Babbylon.. See also the footnote on Judah, 22:1, below.

⁴³ The oracle concerning the “animals of the Negeb” (30:6–7), about the futility of seeking help from Egypt, has a different function from the earlier oracles and simply serves to encourage rebellious Israel (30:1, 9) to trust in the Lord alone. Probably it is this oracle that the prophet is to write on a tablet. See on 30:8, below.

nature. (3) Judah has its own oracle, and Israel is mentioned as part of the series of oracles, both with equally negative prophecies.

(Ad 3): To take the third point first, a quick glance at 22:1-25 will suffice. There are no statements of a positive future for Judah, editorial or otherwise. The same is true for statements in the oracle concerning Israel (17:1-14).

(Ad 1): (i) The extended first oracle concerning Babylon (13:1–14:27), entirely negative for that nation, includes a specific promise of return from exile for Jacob/Israel, with a promise that it, in turn, will “possess the nations”, capture them and rule over their former oppressors (14:1-2).⁴⁴

(ii) The shorter oracle concerning the Philistines (14:28-32) includes a positive remark on Zion: “What will one answer the messengers of the nation? – ‘The Lord has founded Zion and the needy (= the pious) among his people will find refuge in her (14:32).

(iii) The oracle against Syria and the Northern Kingdom of Israel (17:1-14) includes a prose supplement, verses 7-9, that includes a positive statement both for all humanity (יְהוָה!) and for Israel.

(iv) The oracle concerning Egypt (19:1-15 + 19:16–20:6) also include a positive statement about Israel: “On that day Israel will be the third with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing in the midst of the earth, whom the LORD of hosts has blessed, saying, ‘Blessed be Egypt my people, and Assyria the work of my hands, and Israel my heritage’” (19:24-25).

(v) The oracle concerning Tyre (23:1-18), again introducing a diachronic perspective by making a predictive statement stretching over 70 years into the speaker’s future (vv. 15, 17), mentions that Tyre’s “merchandise and her wages will be dedicated to the Lord...her merchandise will supply abundant food and fine clothing for those who live in the presence of the Lord” (23:18). This theme—that the nations will at some point or at various points in the future—bring tribute to Yahweh and be reconciled to the God of Israel is a constant thread that weaves through these oracles and, indeed, the whole book of Isaiah.

(Ad 2): Some remarks will show how editorial layers in the text, sometimes overtly marked as such, add more positive alternatives for some of the nations around Judah.

(i) The oracle about Moab (15:1-16:14) has received different interpretations. Blenkinsopp sees in it an “ironic lament” and a “masterpiece of *Schadenfreude*”. By contrast, I would argue for a different interpretation, developing an interpretation offered by Childs.⁴⁵ The piece was originally a genuine lament that has been

⁴⁴ Perhaps the reference to Jacob/Israel tries to make up for the lack of an oracle concerning the Northern Kingdom.

⁴⁵ Cf. Childs, Isaiah., 131-132.

transformed editorially into an “oracle” by means of the superscription (15:1). Verse 5, in conjunction with 14:28 and the related 6:3, suggests that the speaker is Isaiah of Jerusalem. Verses 1-5 are a prophetic invitation encouraging refugees from war-torn Moab seek asylum in Judah. The lament expresses genuine sorrow over Moab’s suffering (16:11). Verses 4b-5 are a continuation of the prophet’s advice, expressing the hope that the Moabites will find refuge in Judah if and when it is ruled by a just (messianic?) Davidic ruler. Verses 6-8 quote a rejection of Moab’s request for asylum by a “we” group, perhaps Judean officials. Verse 9-12 are a renewed appeal for pity by the prophet. 16:13-14, explicitly marked as a later comment on the preceding material, bring the composite oracle to a close:

This was the word that the LORD spoke concerning Moab in the past.
But now the LORD says, In three years, like the years of a hired worker,
the glory of Moab will be brought into contempt, in spite of all its great
multitude; and those who survive will be very few and feeble.

This is a predictive statement added by a later hand (Blenkinsopp) that reinterprets the lament over Moab’s invasion as a divine judgment against that nation, with worse to come (Childs). The divinely ordained Assyrian invasion was bad enough, but Moab’s distress will continue into the future. “[A]n even greater oppressor, namely the Babylonians, lies in the future as God’s new agent of judgment”.⁴⁶ Blenkinsopp’s comment on 16:13-14 highlights the diachronic dimension of the composite passage’s final form:

This statement presupposes a claim to speak in the name of the same God who spoke years earlier through another anonymous prophet. The nexus is created by the conviction that the God who spoke then is still actively communicating through chosen intermediaries. The new pronouncement does not follow logically from the older one, is not even presented as a comment on it, yet clearly follows from a reading of the text as in some sense an inspired and authoritative utterance. It can be considered interpretation only in the broadest sense of that word. ... The claim to authorization as a mouthpiece of the deity characteristic of prophecy has now been taken over by the interpreter of prophecy. The exegete is now the prophet.⁴⁷

While this example is not really one that makes a positive prediction for Moab, it is noteworthy in the context of our argument in that it includes a significant note of empathy with one of Israel’s traditional enemies and also because it is such a clear example of overt diachronic banter between different textual generations in Isaiah.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 132.

⁴⁷ Blenkinsopp, *Opening the Sealed Book: Interpretations of the Book of Isaiah in Late Antiquity.*, 8.

(ii) Another example is the oracle against Syria and the Northern Kingdom of Israel (17:1-14). It includes a prose supplement, verses 7-9, that contains a statement of hope, not only for Israel, but also for all humanity:

On that day people (אֲנָשִׁים) will regard their Maker, and their eyes will look to the Holy One of Israel; they will not have regard for the altars, the work of their hands, and they will not look to what their own fingers have made, either the sacred poles or the altars of incense. On that day their strong cities will be like the deserted places of the Hivites and the Amorites, which they deserted because of the children of Israel, and there will be desolation.

Note the expression אֲנָשִׁים, referring to all humanity, in v. 7 and the mention of Israel in verse 9.

(iii) The enigmatic oracle concerning Ethiopia (18:1-7), addressing in turn Ethiopia (1:1), Judah (1:2) and “all the inhabitants of the earth”, has a universal and local feel to it. Verse 7 seems to suggest that fearsome Ethiopians bring tribute to Mount Zion, “the place of the name of the Lord of hosts”:

At that time gifts will be brought to the LORD of hosts from a people tall and smooth, from a people feared near and far, a nation mighty and conquering, whose land the rivers divide, to Mount Zion, the place of the name of the LORD of hosts.

I disagree with Childs, who denies that verse 7 is a “late scribal gloss”, but agree with his assessment that this prose appendix, diachronic in both senses of the word (note אֵת הַיּוֹם, “at that time”, the female equivalent of בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא, “on that day”), is “integral to the editor’s intention in shaping the entire passage as a testimony to God’s future rule over the nations of the world”.⁴⁸

(iv) Perhaps the most intriguing example of “positive” addenda in these oracles are some of the prose additions in the oracle concerning Egypt, 19:18-25:

On that day there will be five cities in the land of Egypt that speak the language of Canaan and swear allegiance to the LORD of hosts. One of these will be called the City of the Sun.⁴⁹ On that day there will be an altar to the LORD in the center of the land of Egypt, and a pillar to the LORD at its border. It will be a sign and a witness to the LORD of hosts in the land of Egypt; when they cry to the LORD because of oppressors, he will send them a savior, and will defend and deliver them. The LORD will make himself known to the Egyptians; and the Egyptians will know the LORD on that day, and will worship with sacrifice and burnt offering, and they will make vows to the LORD and

⁴⁸ Childs, *Isaiah*, 139.

⁴⁹ City of the Sun = Heliopolis is a textual emendation based on 1QIsa^a, V and T (instead of MT’s “City of Destruction”). Note Jer 44:1, 15 (four Jewish cities in 6th century) and Letters from Elephantine (4th century).

perform them. The LORD will strike Egypt, striking and healing; they will return to the LORD, and he will listen to their supplications and heal them. On that day there will be a highway from Egypt to Assyria, and the Assyrian will come into Egypt, and the Egyptian into Assyria, and the Egyptians will worship with the Assyrians. On that day Israel will be the third with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing in the midst of the earth, whom the LORD of hosts has blessed, saying, "Blessed be Egypt my people, and Assyria the work of my hands, and Israel my heritage."

The whole passage—"an intertextual extension of the prophecy of 2:2-4" according to Childs—is astonishing and bold, and Blenkinsopp's comment that verse 25 is "surely one of the most eirenic statements in the entire Hebrew Bible", apt as it is, cannot come near to capturing its importance for understanding the relationship between Israel and other nations in the book of Isaiah.⁵⁰

In sum, the larger unit of Isaiah 13–23, often seen as evidence of unhampered xenophobia in First Isaiah and indicative of the overall stance of the book apart from isolated editorial pockets, is shod through with unconcealed editorial comments that do not hide the tensions and animosities that exist between Judah and the Northern Kingdom of Israel, and between these two and the other nations around them. Nevertheless, they highlight—in prominent places and bright colours—that tensions and warfare are not the only way in which a sovereign God directs the relationships between his people and the other nations of the world.

5 Conclusion

The editorial practices and diachronic perspectives operative in the sample texts here studied suggest that the whole book of Isaiah has a universal plan for all humanity, Jew and Gentile. Texts such as 2:2-5; 48:20–49:13; 41:8-9; 43:5-6; 45:20-22; 49:22-26; Isaiah 60-62 and 66:18-21 promise Israel a return from exile and diaspora, as Croatto has rightly shown. However, they also include other nations in the divine plan. There is a mission to the nations. However, this mission is not Israel's mission, but God's. The mission of God to the nations is dependent on his mission to Israel. God's one mission includes both judgment and salvation—for "Israel" and "the Nations." Many of these issues need further working out in a more comprehensive study. However, the argument presented in this paper may contribute to the vision of this year's Oxford Institute with its theme "to serve the present age".

The Methodist Church in the United Kingdom is committed to the so-called "Our Calling" process, a programme of transformation that focuses on four aspects of mission and ministry in which the church hears God's call: worship, service, learning

⁵⁰ Childs, *Isaiah*, 142, Blenkinsopp, *Opening the Sealed Book: Interpretations of the Book of Isaiah in Late Antiquity*, 7.

and caring and evangelism. The contemporary challenges of globalization, social, economic, and political challenges today are poverty in Africa, sustained genocide in Darfur and elsewhere, and the decline of the Church in Europe. These challenges are in many ways similar to the challenges that Israel has faced throughout the formation of the book of Isaiah. Isaiah holds out today the same challenge to repentance and changed life-styles as it did then. It also holds out the same promises. God's redemptive mission in the world has a diachronic dimension—in the past, present and many possible futures. Not all the promises of the "end times" have been fulfilled with the first coming of Christ. The church is called in the intermediate period between then and Christ's second coming to work towards the fulfillment of many others. In my view, the issues of poverty in Africa and modern genocide are the most pressing of our generation. The threat of terrorism currently runs largely along religious lines, with Jews and Christians on one side and Muslims on the other. The book of Isaiah has something to say about the relationships between nations that is directly relevance for all three of these issues. God's mission to his world is not over, it is just getting started. This mission, according to Isaiah, is not so much a centrifugal mission, but a centripetal one (e.g., 2:2-5; 55:1-5). If the church worships and glorifies its God, teaches its members and cares for them so that they will grow in true holiness and wholeness, if its serves its neighbours of whatever background and evangelises through word and deed, people will be drawn towards the God we serve, in our present age and beyond.

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