

BEGINNINGS

In Isa 8:18, Isaiah declares that he and his children are signs and portents to Israel, given by Yahweh. Indeed, children are an important part of the so-called Isaiah memoir of chapters 1-12, dominating the narrative of chapters 7-11.¹ In these chapters, there are four children identified with names: Shear-yashub, Immanu-el, Maher-shalal-hash-baz, and Pele-yoez-el-gibbor-avi'ad-sar-shalom. The latter three are immediately interconnected with the oracles of which they are signs. The focus of scholarship on these children has been to understand the historical events they signify, the precise meaning of their names, and their importance to the immediate context. In this quest, scholars have largely overlooked the question of *why Isaiah even employs children as signs*. This paper is, in part, an attempt to come to terms with that question. But, it is also more than that, it is an attempt to grasp at the meaning(s) of the children as signs, particularly within the broader motif of family that recurs throughout the book of Isaiah. Part of this attempt will seek to explore processes of deferral, refraction, and displacement that operate in the text as well as the relationships between signs, signifiers, and signifieds. The primary concern of this paper is not to prove a thesis—the book of Isaiah defies that type of understanding and explication—rather it is an attempt to open new interpretive and reading possibilities.² It is an exploration of the traces and threads that flow throughout the book and it is written with the conviction that Isaiah tells an intimate story about the family of God and that family's struggles to know and relate meaningfully to the relationships, realities, and worlds that surround them.

¹ By "Isaiah," I mean the implied author of the final text. This paper is not concerned with recovering the original work or message of an historical Isaiah. Instead, this paper attempts to understand the meaning(s) that the text, in its present MT form, and the implied author it creates, encourages.

² See Robert P. 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. Craig C. Broyles and Craig A. Evans; VTSup 70; Leiden: Brill, 1997), 79-93. This paper is inspired by three essays written by my professor, Dr. Francis Landy: Francis Landy, "The Construction of the Subject and the Symbolic Order: A Reading of the Last Three Suffering Servant Songs," in *Beauty and the Enigma: And Other Essays on the Hebrew Bible* (JSOTSup 312; Sheffield: Sheffield, 2001), 206-217; "Tracing the Voice of the Other: Isaiah 28 and the Covenant with Death," in *Beauty and the Enigma: And Other Essays on the Hebrew Bible* (JSOTSup 312; Sheffield: Sheffield, 2001), 185-205; "Vision and Voice in Isaiah," in *Beauty and the Enigma: And Other Essays on the Hebrew Bible* (JSOTSup 312; Sheffield: Sheffield, 2001), 371-391. I hope that my work, at least in some way, opens just a fraction of the possibilities that are breached in these works.

THE STATE OF THE BET `AB IN ISAIAH 1-5

The motif of family recurs throughout the vision accounts of Isaiah's opening chapters of 1-5 and it provides a critical, though overlooked, background to the children that dominate Isaiah 7-11. Isaiah 1:2 activates this family motif with a speech by the father, Yahweh, concerning his sons, Israel, and his daughter, Zion. Isaiah 1:21 re-activates the motif by identifying the mother, Zion. This is an extraordinary family indeed: a god for a father, a mountain for a mother, and a nation and city for children.

In these introductory verses, Isaiah sees in a vision that this extraordinary family has problems. The father Yahweh calls the heavens and the earth as witnesses to hear his complaint. "Sons I have reared and brought up," the father declares, "but they have revolted against me" (v.2). The revolt is rooted in ignorance. The stupidest animals show more awareness than these sons; at least the ox and the donkey know their master and owner. Yahweh's sons, however, do not know ~~who they are~~; they do not understand ~~themselves~~; they are not aware ~~they are sons~~ (cf. 5:13).³ The hitpael ַׁבִּ , which is a reflexive stem, and the pun on ַׁב imply this subversive message.⁴ The simultaneous absence presence of the object of ַׁבִּ deepens the reader's identification with the state of unknowing in which the sons are mired and raises a mystifying conundrum. How can Yahweh have reared and brought up sons without their knowledge of it?

Perhaps, a hint is given in v.4: the children are a sinful nation, people heavy with iniquity, the seed of evildoers, sons who act corruptly. On the surface, this chronicle of vices defines the nature of the revolt but it also signifies a more profound problem. If these children are the seed of evildoers, then they are not the seed of Yahweh. Can the Holy One of Israel beget children who are sinful, heavy with iniquity, and act corruptly? Is this the reason the sons do not know their father?

³ The words with the strikethrough are under erasure because the knowledge that is lacking is both absent and present in the text: absent in that there is no direct object while present in the word choice and pun operating in the text. By placing the words under erasure, I am attempting to convey the sense of that absence and presence. See Anthony C. Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics: The Theory and Practice of Transforming Biblical Reading* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 109.

⁴ Landy, Class Communication.

The thought world out of which this conundrum and problem arise may reflect a particular religious ideology. This issue of sonship and legitimacy is a covenant motif and one of the central conundrums with which all the writers of biblical literature wrestle. Though here, it seems to provide its own answer. The children are not the seed of Yahweh. Israel is not a biological son of Yahweh; it is an adopted son.⁵ Has Yahweh disowned his children?

They have acted corruptly toward Him,
They are not His children, because of their defect;
But are a perverse and crooked generation (Deut 32:5).

There is difference in perspective between the Deuteronomist and Isaiah on this question. In Deut 32:5, Yahweh disowns his children. In Isa 1:4, Yahweh does not now disown his children; he does not say they are not his children. Instead, he calls out to his children, "Why do you invite punishment? Why must you rebel?" (v.5). To draw the questions even more sharply Yahweh gives an assessment of the condition of his children: a catalogue of their bruises and injuries.

This initial window into the divine-human family is pregnant with biblical themes, raising, exploring, and interweaving the issues of Yahweh's relationship to Israel with the negative relationship of doing evil and self-awareness. These themes call forth many intertexts, covenant texts such as I have already mentioned and creation texts. Yahweh's summons to the heavens and the earth in v.2 draws the reader backwards in time to creation while the interconnections of the motifs of self-awareness ignorance and disobedience revolt recall the serpent's seductive promise that human disobedience of the divine would bring about merismatic knowledge of good and evil—a knowledge somehow related to self-awareness, because in undertaking the act of disobedience Adam and Eve immediately become aware of their nakedness. Isaiah's commentary on this intertext, though only beginning in these passages, plays with the themes of this myth; but rather than disobedience leading to self-awareness, Isaiah suggests evil is a Pandora's box

⁵ On this motif and its ancient Near Eastern setting, see Janet L. R. Melnyk, "When Israel was a Child: Ancient Near Eastern Adoption Formulas and the Relationship Between God and Israel," in *History and Interpretation: Essays in Honour of John H. Hayes* (ed. Matt Patrick Graham et al.; JSOTSup 173; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 245-259.

that obscures self-awareness. Despite these differences, these intertexts share the vision that disobedience causes alienation from Yahweh.

At this point, the account of the sons transitions into an account of the daughter. The imagery shifts from the physical condition of the sons to the feminine imagery of land, cities, and fields. The announcement of desolate land, burned cities, and devoured fields—a land desolate, overthrown, and devoured—segues into a haunting image of the daughter Zion. The collusion of references to the daughter, the vineyard, and the cucumber field conjure up the portrait of a beautiful female, vibrant in youth, standing in lush vineyards and cucumber fields—symbols of love and fertility—now left, not merely to fade away with age as in a tragic song of love lost but left abandoned to suffer the fate of a besieged city. The contrast of imagery imparts a staggering sense of utter ruin.

With the sons bruised and beaten and the daughter abandoned and defenceless, the story of a family and its wayward children breaks with a disturbing announcement that incites hope even as it instills terror. The warrior God, Yahweh Sabaoth, may preserve survivors from among his children but it is he who directs the punishers.

In the break, Isaiah introduces new images and motifs that contribute to the overall sense of social anomie that dominates the early chapters of the book. The motif of family, however, quickly resurfaces in Isa 1:21 to (re-)introduce mother Zion and raises again the spectre of illegitimacy summoned in 1:4. Mother Zion has become a harlot; a passive object—a Freudian void—a receptacle that must be filled; and where formerly this woman was filled with justice, and righteousness dwelt in her, now murderers reside in her. Yahweh, however, does not abandon the harlot but as warrior God, the Mighty One of Israel, he will purify her, redeem her, and reclaim her—a motif that looks forward to Isaiah 66:8-13. God will restore the judges and counsellors (יְעָדִים, v.26) of old; and Zion, along with those who turn (שׁוֹבִים, v.27b), will once again be characterized by faithfulness, justice, and righteousness—a theme that looks forward to the children of Isa 7-11. This message is a sign of hope in the otherwise depressing portrait of a family in Isaiah 1.

The chapters of Isa 2-5 do not centre on this family motif, though visions of Zion (2:1-5) and her daughters (3:16-4.6) play with the motif to a degree. Yet, even though the family motif recedes, there are some important references to children, two explicit (3:4-5, 12) and two implicit (2:6, 5:2), where the close reader can only perceive the shadow of children in the often incomprehensible poetic language of this section. Of these references, Isa 3:4-5, in which Yahweh announces his intention to make boys and babes rulers over his people and forewarns that the young will disrespect the old, and Isa 5:7, the description of Judah as Yahweh's cherished (עֲשֵׂשׂוּ) planting, an image that conveys the type of delight and joy a father bears towards his children, will surface in my analysis of the children: Shear-yashub, Immanu-el, Maher-shalal-hash-baz, and Pele-yoez-el-gibbor-avi'ad-sar-shalom.

SHEAR-YASHUB (ISAIAH 7)

Shear-yashub is the first son of Isaiah mentioned in the book. Of the children that dominate the section of Isaiah 7-11, Shear-yashub is the least developed. There is no birth announcement or naming formula as there is for Immanu-el, Maher-shalal-hash-baz, and Pele-yoez-el-gibbor-avi'ad-sar-shalom; and Shear-yashub is not the highlight of divine revelation.

Yet, despite the unsustained interest in this child, the reference to him is intrusive in its unexpectedness and apparent irrelevance. Yahweh instructs Isaiah to go out to meet Ahaz and to take his son, Shear-yashub, with him. Certainly, the reader understands why Isaiah must go to meet Ahaz but why the instruction that he take this son? The request is all the more strange in that Shear-yashub has no actual presence in the meeting. In fact, the reader can not even be certain that Isaiah complied with the instruction. Shear-yashub says nothing and does nothing.

So, why is Isaiah instructed to take this son with him? That Yahweh designates Shear-yashub by name to go with Isaiah suggests that there is significance in the name itself. The problem, however, is that the name Shear-yashub has a somewhat ambivalent meaning or at least it is deliberately ambiguous and polysemous. Childs observes that Shear-yashub might convey a portent of disaster, "only a remnant will return," or a sign of hope, "surely a remnant

will return.”⁶ Yet, this is not even the limit of the ambiguity. Rather than a physical return from a place, the verb may convey repentance: “only a remnant will turn” or “surely a remnant will turn.” Furthermore, the identity of this remnant is not as apparent as some might suggest. Should the reader understand the remnant as an extension of the stump in Isa 6:13? Is the remnant the implied reader, a particular community within Judah or Israel, or even an outsider community?

Roberts connects Shear-yashub with the narrative of Isa 10:20-24a, suggesting this is the displaced oracle that explains the sign of Shear-yashub.⁷ The theory is attractive but Roberts largely ignores the more pressing issue of the present structure and the prevalence of displacement in the book.⁸ If source critical analysis of the book has yielded any consensus, it is that the book’s oracles, motifs, and themes are broken up and interspersed throughout the text. The reader frequently encounters an oracle or refrain in one section taken up again in subsequent sections. Source criticism tries to put these oracles back together again but what if the displacement and interruption of these oracles is part of the point? Meaning, oracle, and vision are constantly being refracted and deferred by the emergence of new contexts and so new texts; it is Derrida’s theory of *différance* in process. In this case, a sign and its signifier may remain constant but the signified is in a perpetual state of deferral, causing a perpetual resignification of the sign and leaving traces of other possible texts. Indeed, the author plays with the concept of Shear-yashub in many different contexts beyond just 10:20-24a; שָׂרְיָשׁוּב is one of this author’s *leitwörter* while repentance and return-from-exile are repeatedly juxtaposed.

Displacement and simultaneous absence presence are as much terms to describe the semiotic processes working in the sign of Shear-yashub as they are an eery reflection of being a

⁶ Brevard S. Childs, *Isaiah* (OTL; Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 94-95. See also Hans Wildberger, *Isaiah 1-12: A Commentary* (trans. Thomas H. Trapp; 2 vols.; CC; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 296-297, who discusses several possibilities.

⁷ J. J. M. Roberts, “Isaiah and His Children,” in *Biblical and Related Studies Presented to Samuel Iwry* (ed. Ann Kort and Scott Morschauser; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1985), 193-203, 200-203.

⁸ I intend with the term “displacement” to convey at once both the general concept of a text being removed from context and placed into another as well as the Freudian process “in which sequences and images [of the dream-as-remembered] become transformed” (Thiselton, *New Horizons*, 349).

remnant. Isaiah's remnant, in whatever context it appears, is always subject to physical displacement from the land or alternatively spiritual displacement in relation to Yahweh, Zion, or the rest of Israel—the very word **רִשְׁטָה** differentiates, and so displaces, a part from the whole. Isaiah's remnant also represents the enduring presence of Israel and the faithfulness of Yahweh while simultaneously testifying to the absence of Israel's national existence and the judgment of Yahweh. The overwhelming indeterminacy of the sign of Shear-yashub suggests that there is no definitive way of interpreting his role in this narrative. He is at once all things: a sign of hope, repentance, and renewal while also a sign of despair, obstinacy, and judgment. He may foreshadow the immediate deliverance of Judah from Syria and Ephraim, the decimation of Judah by Assyria, the ultimate demise of Judah by Babylon, the restoration of a remnant in Yehud, a community suffering persecution under Antiochus Epiphanes, or even the Holocaust survivors of the twentieth century. His name gives him presence. Even so, he is the epitome of absence: a sign with no oracle and so without a signified, displaced with no voice, nothing. Ironically though, it is his absence that permits, even invites, his presence.

IMMANU-EL (ISAIAH 7)

It is remarkable that Shear-yashub, a child that is as much about absence as about presence, should come to herald another child, who signifies ultimate presence. The sign of Immanu-el is the promise of divine presence, "With us God." For Isaiah though, the presence of Yahweh is often a terrifying presence:

Go into the rocks,
and hide in the ground
before the terror of Yahweh
and from the dreaded splendour of his majesty (Isa 2:10).

It is a presence so pervasive that everything else must hide at its coming.

The oracle preceding the sign announces that the plot of Syria and Ephraim to conquer Jerusalem and raise a puppet king to the throne of Judah will fail. This propitious oracle ends with an ominous bicolon directed towards Ahaz:

If you do not stand firm in your faith,
you will not stand at all (Isa 7:9b).

Though the plot of Syria and Ephraim will not succeed, Judah's ultimate survival is also at stake and rests on a condition of faith. Ahaz immediately fails this condition of faith when he rejects Yahweh's offer of a sign with a pretence of piety. Despite Ahaz's rejection, Yahweh gives a sign anyways, the sign of Immanu-el.

The giving of the Immanu-el sign generates more questions than it seems to address. Most commentators, in fact, push the message it signifies to the background as they attempt to contend with the myriad of questions the ambiguous announcement raises: Who is the young woman? Who is the child?⁹ Perhaps no two questions have given rise to more scholarship in biblical studies than these ones. The young woman is variously associated with a wife of Isaiah, Isaiah's wife the prophetess, Ahaz's wife, a non-specific woman of the royal court, a non-specific woman who was in the vicinity, all the women of the royal court, all the women of Jerusalem, a goddess, and Mary the mother of Jesus. The child is identified as a son of Isaiah, Isaiah's son Maher-shalal-hash-baz, the king's son (usually Hezekiah), Josiah, a non-specific child, any child, a divine child, and Jesus. There are some who even claim that the young woman and the child are simply the idea or the vision of these things; that the sign is not a physical reality at all. In any case, there is no consensus on this issue almost certainly because the sign itself defies appropriation. The reader must accept that Isaiah simply does not specify the identity of the young woman and the child. This acceptance will necessarily push forward the critical issue of determining what is signified by the sign and signifier.

Three perplexing statements, which explicate the signified, follow the announcement of the sign and signifier. The diet of curds and honey is a sign within a sign that signifies Yahweh's providential care of the child (v.15a).¹⁰ This provision is related either causally or temporally to

⁹ Joseph Jensen, "Immanuel," *ABD* 3:392-395 provides an excellent overview of scholarship on these questions, identifying the prominent proponents of the various positions.

¹⁰ This is, of course, one reading among many. I take this reading because curds are generally portrayed as an ingredient in distinguished meals in Gen 18:8; Judg 5:25; 2 Sam 17:29; Job 20:17; and Job 29:6; likewise, honey is a

the phrase “to know to reject the evil and choose the good” (v.15b).¹¹ In either case, before the time the youth (נער) knows to reject the evil and choose the good, Yahweh will make desolate the land of the kings of Syria and Ephraim (v.16) and humiliate the house of Ahaz (v.17). The second oracle, therefore, is oracle and counter-oracle. It is an oracle of deliverance that reaffirms the failure and destruction of Syria and Ephraim while also a counter-oracle of judgment against the house of Ahaz. Four eschatological oracles that describe the time of devastation follow this oracle. Of these, only one oracle offers a faint hope: in v.21-22, Isaiah prophesies about a remnant (יִתְרוֹ), who, like Immanu-el, will eat curds and honey.

The language of good and evil of vv.15-16 invites dialogue with Isaiah 1:2 and the Eden story. In contrast to Yahweh’s sons of 1:2, Immanu-el will possess the capacity to know and perhaps more significantly he will know to reject the evil and choose the good. Similarly, in contrast to Adam and Eve, Immanu-el will learn not only the knowledge of good and evil but will possess moral discernment to choose *correctly* (!) between them. This ability for moral discernment is an attribute of the ideal kingship of David (2 Sam 14:17) and Solomon (1 Kgs 3:9) and so, along with the providential care Yahweh directs towards the child, may convey subtle hints of the future greatness of the child. Judah’s salvation (such as it is), however, will come in the time before Immanu-el learns this ability of moral discernment; he will be a child.

Like the signified of the Shear-yashub sign, the signified of the Immanu-el sign may also have undergone at least partial displacement. In this case the final clause of Isa 8:8 and the hymn of vv.9-10 may be a displaced oracle that provides a further or alternate explication of the sign of Immanu-el. In its present place in the text, this oracle reinterprets the sign of Immanu-el

recurrent ingredient of food lists that connote abundance and plenty. Also, the phrase, “curds and honey,” closely mirrors “milk and honey,” the latter occurring 20x in the HB as an idyllic reference to the land of promise; and Isaiah seems to regard curds with greater value than milk (7:22). Furthermore, in Deut 32:13-14, curds and honey are mentioned separately among a list of food Yahweh serves Israel—a list in which every item is meant to amplify Yahweh’s extravagant provision.

¹¹ The “ל” can have a causal or temporal sense; both make sense in this context, such that both may even be intended. If causal, Yahweh’s providential care will be the cause for the child “to reject the evil and choose the good” (as Yahweh had hoped in Deut 32). If temporal, the phrase “to reject the evil and choose the good” implies that Yahweh’s providential care will extend to adulthood (roughly twenty years of age, see Deut 1:39; cf. Num 14:29-30, 32:11).

in light of the sign of Maher-shalal-hash-baz and conversely explains the sign of Maher-shalal-hash-baz in the light of the sign of Immanu-el. This intertextuality of the signs of Immanu-el and Maher-shalal-hash-baz results in a convergence of meaning, which alternately transforms and deconstructs the reality they are meant to signify.

MAHER-SHALAL-HASH-BAZ (ISAIAH 8)

The sign of Maher-shalal-hash-baz is a conceptual twin of the Immanu-el sign. In fact, these signs are so similar that some scholars suggest that there is only one underlying sign-act. Blenkinsopp articulates this as the hypothesis of "*alternative accounts of one sign-act*" with the one account of the sign-act, Immanu-el, delivered to the royal house of Judah and the second account, Maher-shalal-hash-baz, addressed to the general populace of Judah.¹² Blenkinsopp points out the parallels that exist between these two signs—children with significant names, unnamed mothers, references to the pregnancy and delivery of the child, a naming formula, phrases that delimit a time "before the child..." and references to the king of Assyria—all encompassed within oracles that predict deliverance as well as divine punishment for Judah at the hands of the Assyrian king.¹³

On one level, the sign of Maher-shalal-hash-baz, like the Immanu-el sign, serves a simple purpose of delineating the time frame within which a promised action will occur. By the foreseeable course of his growth and development, Maher-shalal-hash-baz serves as Yahweh's living pledge or sign of the impending destruction of Syria and Ephraim. Human experience allows us to approximate that Yahweh promises this impending destruction within a year of the birth of this child.

Yet, on a second level, the sign of Maher-shalal-hash-baz connects with the theme of language and speech that flows throughout Isaiah's visions and reports. The words מַנִּי and אֶבְרָם are anecdotally the first words spoken by a child and so Yahweh/Isaiah envisions the sign-

¹² Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 1-39: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (eds. William Foxwell Albright and David Noel Freedman; AB 19; New York: Doubleday, 2000), 238-239, (italics his).

¹³ Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 1-39*, 239.

fulfillment at a time before the child develops coherent or intelligible speech. It is significant then that in the first part of the sign Yahweh commands Isaiah to write rather than speak. Yahweh instructs Isaiah to engrave the message *בו מזהר שלל חש* on a *גליון גדול* with a *חרט אנוש*.¹⁴ Further to this, Isaiah does not explicate or contextualize the message; the words *שלל חש בו מזהר* are the extent of the testimony.¹⁵ In part, this absence of a speech-act or an explication of the message is a working out of Isaiah's commission to obfuscate; he delivers his message but it is a message that will not, indeed can not, instil understanding (except perhaps among his disciples, vv.16-18). The message has no meaning, at least not until it is *assigned* a meaning by the command to name the child, *בו מזהר שלל חש*.

It is, however, more than this. The child represents a potential enactment of this process: by uttering the words *אמי* and *אבי*, the child would articulate *différance* in the subjects that surround him, acknowledge the categories of Self (implicitly), *אבי*, and *אמי* and so invent or create meaning through a speech-act. This means, of course, that the ability to speak the words *אבי* and *אמי* is not only a sign of the advent of speech but also a sign of individuation. Interestingly, Isa 1:2-3 and 5:13 testifies that Israel itself has not reached this state of

¹⁴ For recent critics, the tools with which and on which Isaiah is supposed to engrave this message has opened floodgates of interpretation. It is perhaps a facet of the theme of un-intelligibility that the instruments of the message are so obscure (although perhaps not so obscure to the implied reader of the text). In any case, *גליון* is a particularly striking word in this context. It probably means simply "blank sheet" but its root shares associations with words such as open, uncover, reveal, and exile. In the list of fashions worn by the daughters of Zion of Isa 3:23, *הגליינים* may denote revealing (transparent) dresses, conventionally associated with the fashion of the female upper classes of Egypt. However, the most striking aspect of the root, at least for this context, is that it is historically a verb of motion, which relates on form to the message inscribed on the *גליון* (NIDOTTE, "גלה," elec. ed.). All of these etymological associations support the activity of revelation as well as the underlying theme of movement that dominates the account of the sign-act—note such words as *לקח*, *כתב*, *מזהר*, *חש*, *קרב*, and *נשא*. It even creates an impression of movement in the very revelation itself.

¹⁵ In all honesty, I am not entirely convinced that *בו מזהר שלל חש* is the actual content of the inscription. The LXX translation understands this phrase as a general statement concerning the content of the writing: *τοῦ ὀξέως προνομήν ποιήσαι σκύλων πάρεστιν γάρ* compared with *ταχέως σκύλευσον ὀξέως προνόμεισον* in v.3. There is some validity to this reading insofar as the standard reading presupposes v.3 in reading *בו מזהר שלל חש* as a proper name in v.1. The LXX translation, on the other hand, preserves the integrity of the suspense by translating *בו מזהר שלל חש* as a clause. This reading would also make more sense of the instruction. If the phrase is the actual content, it has little or no meaning apart from the subsequent birth of the child and so begs the question of the purpose in writing it down beforehand. But, if the phrase describes the content of the writing, then presumably the actual content would consist of a relevant and meaningful prophetic message even if that content remains unknown (cf. Isa 8:16, as there, perhaps this writing is the book of Isaiah in whole or in part). In either case though, whether reading with the MT or the LXX, the important point to observe is that the reader does not have access to the meaning of this message that Isaiah writes.

awareness. Israel even cynically clamours for this knowledge in 5:19, "Let him make haste (מהר), let him speed (חוש) his work that we may see it; let the plan of the Holy One of Israel hasten to fulfillment, that we may know (ידע) it!" In the texts of 1:2-3, 5:13 and 5:18-19, an undeniable thread surfaces, which converges in the sign of Maher-shalal-hash-baz. The thread is made explicit by the recurrence of the root ידע (ידע in 5:13) in all these texts; the parallelism of מהר and חוש in 5:18-19 and twice in the name of the child in 8:1-4; and the motif of father and child used in both 1:2-3 and 8:1-4. The thread suggests the possibility that Maher-shalal-hash-baz is, at least in part, a synecdoche for Israel insofar as they share an inability to articulate their familial relationships. It also suggests that destruction will precede the acquisition of knowledge. Of course, at this point, the destruction would seem to be directed towards Syria and Ephraim but the oracle of 8:5-8, which draws out the implications of the sign of Maher-shalal-hash-baz, promises a wider path of destruction.

Interpreting the oracle of 8:5-8 rests primarily in the meaning(s) of the metaphors that dominate it. The crux interpretum for this oracle is its conclusion in v.8. Many scholars see the transition in v.8 from the image of the rushing river of vv.6-8a to the image of outspread wings of v.8b as a striking incongruity. In turn, scholars have proposed many different readings to reconcile, harmonize, or otherwise explain the relationship between these images and the relationship between v.8a and v.8b (or alternatively between v.8b and v.9).¹⁶ There is certainly an abrupt shift in imagery from v.8a to v.8b but it does not necessarily require the contortionist readings offered by most scholars.

The oracle of 8:5-8 stimulates a transformative and deconstructive turn in the text that operates in at least three ways. First, the oracle inverts conventional binaries to reinvigorate conventional images, the images of the river and outspread wings, with more substantive and polyvalent connotations. The river becomes not only an image of life but also death. Likewise,

¹⁶ Childs, *Isaiah*, 73 provides a quick summation of the approaches.

the image of outspread wings comes to denote not only protection but also invasion and conquest.

It is likely true that כַּנְיָ does not refer to the banks of the flooding river. Instead, the suffix probably refers to the referent envisioned by the rushing river, namely the king of Assyria and all his glory. The image of the outspread wings then is a new image or counter-image to that of the rushing river. Even so, it shares continuity with the image of the flooding river in that the outspread wings are another image that conveys the covering of the land.

There is, however, more than this: both images involve a deconstruction of binary operations. In almost all literature, and certainly within the Hebrew Bible, rivers are associated with life but also represent threat; both images are present in the metaphor of the river in this passage. True to the image of rivers and the representation of Assyria as a river in this passage, Assyria is a source of life for the people of Judah: the promise is that the king of Assyria will deliver Judah from the Syro-Ephraimite conspiracy. The river will bring its deliverance, however, not as a source of life but as a swift and destructive force that will overflow its banks and indiscriminately bring its destruction upon Judah too. The binary of life and death dissolves with the ebb and flow of the floodwaters. The glory of the river and so the glory of Assyria is spent in the aftermath of the flood—a point made in Isaiah 10 and elsewhere. Yahweh/Isaiah contrasts this picture of the unwieldy river with the calm waters of Shiloah; the waters that could have brought life without destruction.¹⁷

Similarly, outspread wings are conventionally an image of protection, especially the protection extended by Yahweh or a righteous person to a supplicant (Ex 19:4; Deut 32:11; Ps 17:8, 18:11, 36:8, 57:2, 61:5, 63:7, 68:13, 91:4). The image of outspread wings even serves as a figure of speech for a pledge of marriage and may also be a euphemism for sexual intimacy (Ezek 16:8; Ruth 2:12, 3:9). These are not the outspread wings of Yahweh, however, that cover

¹⁷ It is quite possible that the conduit and upper pool of Isa 7:3 are in fact the waters of Shiloah and so Shiloah may represent the prophecy of 7:7-9 or even the sign of Immanu-el given to confirm that prophecy.

the land of Judah; they are the outspread wings of Assyria.¹⁸ In this passage, the inversion of the binary implicates Judah in an adulterous and idolatrous relationship with Assyria. In light of Isaiah's condemnation of Assyria and the associations with protection, marriage, and sexual intimacy conveyed by the image of outspread wings, this language vividly portrays the covering of Judah by a foreign power. Judah forsakes its shield, its bridegroom, and its lover—Yahweh—for an adulterous and idolatrous relationship with the king and god of Assyria. These are the outspread wings of invasion and conquest (cf. Jer 48:40, 49:22).

Second, the contrast of Assyria as river and Yahweh as Shiloah as well as the deeply ironic and polyvalent image of the outspread wings of Assyria opens the possibilities for a resignification of the child's name, Maher-shalal-hash-baz. In this case, the name is resignified as a janus omen, which heralds not only the swift destruction of the Syro-Ephraimite conspiracy but also signals the destruction of Judah. Yahweh, who Isaiah presents as the ultimate arbiter of Judah's fate, promises Judah's deliverance through Assyrian agency while simultaneously he announces the disastrous consequences this decision will bring upon them. This double-edged interpretation is articulated and refined in later texts that take up the imagery of raging rivers and floods from this oracle, such as 10:20-23 and 28:14-22. Furthermore, this resignified omen betrays an almost satirical contempt for the people, that is that the people themselves asked for Yahweh to act with *מִהֵר* and *חֹשׁ* (in 5:19) and that request, fulfilled in the image of the rushing water, now becomes their undoing.

Third, this oracle, which presents Assyria as an over-zealous interlocutor for the promise of "With us God," transforms and deconstructs the sign of Immanu-el. The deferral of God's presence, now mediated through Assyria, implies an absence from within Jerusalem and Judah. Assyria not God, as expressed in the images of the river and the outspread wings, will envelop

¹⁸ Attempts to construe this image as a representation of Yahweh seem to me unnecessarily contrived. These attempts are almost solely driven by the apparent incongruity of the image. But, in my opinion, to deny the author this ability to create irony requires a stronger argument than simply pointing out the incongruity. There must be a syntactical or semantic necessity, which is lacking here.

Jerusalem and Judah (up to the neck). Thus, the deconstruction of the Immanu-el sign: "With us God but not yet" or "With us God above the neck" or "~~With us God.~~"

But, even as the presence of God retreats behind Assyrian agency, the sign of Immanuel is reinvigorated by the closing vocative of v.8 and the hymn of vv.9-10. The transition from the oracle of judgment to the hymn may seem absurd at first. After all the oracle of 8:5-8 promises not only the destruction of the Syro-Ephraimite conspiracy but the destruction of Judah too. Surely, this is not an oracle worth a resounding hymn! The oracle, however, makes a subtle yet highly significant distinction that invites the strange vocative at v.8 and accounts for the transition to the hymn. The oracle sounds the destruction of Judah *up to its neck*; thus by implication the head, a metaphor of kingship, remains above the rising floodwaters. The head is preserved. This note sounds an echo of Yahweh's message of deliverance in 7:7-9 and actually seems to complete the thought of that message. The heads of Syria and Ephraim are its kings but the head of Judah is Yahweh, manifested in the sign of Immanu-el. The appeal to Immanu-el in 8:8, echoed again in 8:10, is an appeal to the sign that confirms the message of deliverance in 7:7-9. It also seems to infuse Immanu-el with a royal identity or build upon the hints of such an identity already present in 7:14-17 and it offers hope in the aftermath of the destruction just announced in 8:4-8.

PELE-YOEZ-EL-GIBBOR-AVI'AD-SAR-SHALOM, THE IDEAL RULER (ISAIAH 9FF)

In Isaiah 9, a third child emerges who is a distinctive sign in his own right, a *sensus plenior* of the Immanu-el child, and a reflection of a child yet to come in Isaiah 11. In the immediate context of Isa 9:1-6, the announcement of the birth and name of the child in vv.5-6 is the culminating reason for the joy of the people in vv.1-2.

The announcement of the birth and name of this child differs in part from the announcements regarding Immanu-el and Maher-shalal-hash-baz. This announcement does not precede the child's birth, it follows it. There is no mention of the conception of the child or the pregnancy of a mother. In fact, this announcement does not make any references to a mother or even father of the child. This child is born to the people and given to the people; the people

assume ownership of this child. While there is no reported reaction from the people to the signs of Immanu-el and Maher-shalal-hash-baz, Pele-yoez-el-gibbor-avi'ad-sar-shalom elicits joy from the people. This child also has an unequivocal future set before it. He is not merely an object of scrutiny, born to provide a temporal limit within which a promised action will occur; Pele-yoez is born to rule, an active participant in the increase of government, peace without end, and the establishment and support of the throne and kingdom of David.

There is alot about this child though that does not make immediate sense:

- (1) There is an apparent incongruity in the language describing him. On the one hand, this announcement clearly concerns the birth and naming of a child (יֶלֶד יְלֵדָה לְנוֹ) but on the other hand, this announcement invests this child with sovereign authority (מְשָׁרָה) and stresses this child's role as a guarantor of the unending peace and security of the throne and kingdom of David.
- (2) The name of this child is an enigma on syntactical and semantic levels. The sheer number of suggested readings of these names is well-known to any scholars of this passage.¹⁹ Yet, whatever the reading, there is little doubt that this child's name blurs the distinctions between this child and God.

¹⁹ These suggestions are not even confined to the words שלום שר אביעד שר גבור אל יעוץ אל גבור אביעד שר שלום. Wildberger, *Isaiah 1-12*, 385, 387, 405, following Alt, adds what is in his reading a fifth name from the words למרבה המשרה, removing לם (with its awkward final mem) as dittography and reading המשרה as "great in (his) sovereign authority." Buber, on other hand, reads פלא as modifying שמו and therefore not a part of the name. Of all the words, the only agreement among scholars is that שלום שר should be rendered as one epithet, "prince of peace" (or variations on the same, i.e. "peaceable ruler," "welfare official," etc.). There also seems to be an emerging consensus that אל גבור should be rendered in such a way that גבור modifies אל rather than אל modifies גבור and so, "mighty God" or "warrior God" are generally preferred to "divine warrior" or "God-like warrior." An additional option, following the Vulgate, is reading "el-gibbor" as two separate epithets; this reading, however, has little if any scholarly support. With respect to אביעד, most scholars seem to favour a variation on the traditional "Everlasting Father," such as "father forever" or "eternal Father," though Otto Kaiser, *Isaiah 1-12* (trans. John Bowden; 2nd ed.; OTL; Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1983), 213, and now others following him, have forwarded a strong argument for reading "father of spoil." There are a few other minority suggestions supported by individual scholars but none have received substantial support. The first words are perhaps the most troublesome for scholars. Suggestions have ranged from reading two separate epithets ("wonder" and "counsellor"), a construct chain ("a wonder of a planner" or "Wonderful Counsellor"), or a participial phrase ("planner of wonder"). Beyond this, there are even further suggestions that attempt to join some of the words or phrases into noun or verbal clauses. Representative views of this approach, include the NJPS that reads, "The Mighty God is planning grace; The Everlasting Father, a peaceable ruler," W. L. Holladay, *Isaiah: Scroll of a Prophetic Heritage* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 109 who reads, "Planner of wonders; God the war hero is Father forever; prince of well-being," and John Goldingay, "The Compound Name in Isaiah 9:5(6)," *CBQ* 61 (1999): 239-244 who reads, "One who plans a

There are many ways to resolve these two problems with the overwhelming number of approaches attempting to root this text in some sort of royal birth, investiture, or accession ritual. The results of such approaches have yielded considerable insights. For instance, there is little doubt in my opinion that this oracle plays with the genre of enthronement ritual. Nevertheless, Childs insightfully observes, "The oracle may well reflect the conventional language of its milieu, but far more significant for determining its meaning is to recognize the predominantly eschatological movement of the oracle."²⁰ Childs goes on to say, "In my opinion, it is a major misunderstanding of this passage to politicize its message and derive the oracle from an enthusiasm over the accession of one of Judah's kings."²¹

One of the reasons it is a mistake to connect this child-king with the accession of one of Judah's kings is that, whatever the pre-history of this oracle, it is a text constantly subject to reinterpretations by the earlier and later texts that surround it in the book of Isaiah. Perhaps at one time, this oracle embodied Judah's enthusiasm towards Hezekiah or Josiah. But, in the end, each king that assumed the Judahite throne failed to meet the expectations of this enthusiasm

wonder is the warrior God; the father for ever is a commander who brings peace." This last approach attempts not only to solve the syntactical problems but also aims to do so in consideration of the semantic problems that are raised by reading a series of epithets. If read as a series of epithets, the name of this child poses several semantic incongruities, particularly with a traditional rendering such as "Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace." First, the epithet rendered "Wonderful Counsellor" is somewhat inappropriate as a label for the king; conventionally a king is not himself a counsellor but calls on counsellors for advice. Second, "Mighty God" is clearly a divine epithet and therefore would seem to suggest the divinity of this child, which, if accepted, would only seem to amplify the incongruity of the first epithet not to mention the problem it would pose for Isaiah's monotheism. Third, a "Prince" is conventionally a subordinate ruler or captain to a king and therefore, like in the first instance, it seems a somewhat inappropriate label for the king. For my part and in consideration of all these views: I read "planner of wonders, mighty God, my father (is) forever, commander of peace" on most days. I agree that these are throne names in the pattern of Egyptian enthronement liturgy and so I am sympathetic but not entirely convinced by the Wildberger/Alt hypothesis of a fifth name. In any case, the first two names are a strong statement of the divinity of the child; the third name situates the child as the son of God; and the fourth name refers to the king in his role as commander-of-the-army. The first name echoes the plans of Yahweh in Isa 14:26 and 19:11 (where "עֵץ" appears in much the same sense—of planning rather than counselling, cf. Isa 14:24, 27; 19:12; 23:9; 25:1; 28:29; 29:14). The second name is an unequivocal divine epithet and an image of war. The name appears again in Isa 10:21 where it may refer either to this child or Yahweh. The third name recalls the father-son motif that expresses Yahweh's relationship with Davidic kings (2 Sam 7:5-16, esp. v. 14 // 1 Chr 17:5-14, esp. v.13) as well as Yahweh's relationship with Israel (Isa 1:2-3 et al). The fourth name echoes the שָׁלוֹם מִלְּאֲבִי of Isa 33:7, though 9:5 invokes the military position of שָׂר in place of the מִלְּאֲבִי to create this strange picture of a commander of peace (cf. i.e. Isa 3:3). This fourth name also stands in strange juxtaposition with the second name: the mighty (warrior) God set against the commander of peace.

²⁰ Childs, *Isaiah*, 80.

²¹ Childs, *Isaiah*, 80.

and so the hopes and enthusiasm that this oracle expresses are refracted, displaced, and deferred to new times and new contexts, creating new texts and new reading possibilities. This perspective invites readers to understand and embrace (rather than explain away) the apparent incongruities of this text.

The reader must take seriously that this is a child-king. This child is an ideal Davidide—an antitype of the kings of Judah, such as Ahaz—and his accession signals the symbolic rebirth of the House of David freed from vassalage.

This is not simply the investiture of a newborn crown-prince. The language of the oracle leaves no doubt that Isaiah envisions a transferal of power from an oppressor to a new king. In v.3, the yoke (על), the bar (מטה), and the rod of the oppressor (שבט הנגש) are broken. In v.4, the boots (סאוין) and the garments (שמלה) of war are destroyed by fire. In v.5, this child is born to the people; a child with authority to rule on David's throne. Illegitimate rule is overthrown and legitimate rule is established.

This is not simply the accession of a Judahite king symbolically represented as a child. While there is some biblical, and also historical, precedent for identifying a king as a son, there is simply no biblical, or even historical, precedent for portraying a king as a child (unless it is a reflection of fact).

The accession of the child-king is an ironical, though also gracious, fulfillment of Yahweh's promise to set an infant as ruler over Israel (Isa 3:4, 12). The child-king is the embodiment of a divine plan and even divinity itself: the *sensus plenior* of Immanu-el. The blurring of God and child-king as implied in the names of the child and the consequences of his rule manifests the incarnation of the rule and also presence of Yahweh in the monarch.²²

The oracle of 10:20-27, which draws on this oracle, reinforces the blurring of God and child-king. In this passage, key language incorporates aspects of prophecy signified in Shear-yashub, Maher-shalal-hash-baz, Pele-yoez-el-gibbor-avi'ad-sar-shalom with the ideal ruler of

²² This is not a phenomenon unique to Isaiah, cf. Ps 2, 45, 110; 1 Chr 28:5, 29:23; 2 Chr 9:8, 13:8, where this distinction also blurs.

11:1-9. Isaiah prophesies an end to the destruction decreed in 8:4-8—שׁטן alludes to the image of Assyria as the river—and an end to the oppression of Judah. Shear-yashub, in this context a remnant saved from the destruction wrought by Assyria, returns to El-gibbor, a epithet that in light of 9:4 refers to both Yahweh and the child-king. As a reference to the child-king, it portrays him as a representative of the post-exilic age and the focal point for the ingathering of the dispersed remnant. This portrait resonates strongly with 11:10, which announces that “the root of Jesse will stand as a signal for the peoples of the world.” In 10:26-27, an allusion to Midian presages the breaking of the yoke by the anointing of the child-king; a repetition of the language and a fulfillment of the promises of 9:1-6.²³ In 10:26, it is Yahweh who wields a rod against the Assyrians. In 11:4, it is the ideal king who strikes the earth with “the rod of his mouth.”

The unmistakable connections with Isa 11 are important for understanding the eschatological development of the oracle of 9:1-6. The shoot and branch are continuations of the theme of the ideal king. The endowment of the charismata contribute to the blurring of distinctions between God and king, confirming the promise of “With us God” and empowering this shoot and branch to be a “planner of wonders” and “Mighty God.” The images of a peaceful and just rule give resonance to the portrait of the child-king, the commander of peace, in 9:6, whose rule is characterized by never-ending peace and justice. Indeed, it is startlingly how quickly the image of ruler in this chapter segues into the image of the child leading the animals or the infants who play with snakes. They are not necessarily one and the same but the transition, at least, invites a correlation of office. Both king and child exemplify the characteristics of harmonious leadership in the new eschatological kingdom.

The portrait of the ideal ruler that emerges from the convergence of Immanu-el, Pele-yoez-el-gibbor-avi’ad-sar-shalom, and the root of Jesse echoes throughout the rest of the book of Isaiah. Echoes of this theme are found in Isa 28 and 32 (and elsewhere) and these echoes

²³ Most commentators judge that the final phrase of 10:27, וְחָבַל עַל מַפְנֵי־שָׁמַן, is garbled; see Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 1-39*, 259; Kaiser, *Isaiah 1-12*, 243; Wildberger, *Isaiah 1-12*, 447. I read, “and the yoke will be destroyed by the oil” where the oil is a metonymy representing an anointed king, in this case a reference to the child-king of 9:1-6 (cf. בֶּן־שָׁמַן in Isa 5:1).

eventually connect with the person of Cyrus and the servant of the Lord in Second Isaiah, each new context offering new interpretive possibilities for the child-king.

There are also important echoes of Edenic themes that play with the theme of the knowledge of good and evil. The ability to exercise justice, prefigured in the oracle of Immanu-el, is a characteristic of both the child-king in 9:5-6 and the branch of Jesse in 11:1-9. Isaiah, however, portrays this ability in particularly remarkable language in 11:1-9. In the Hebrew Bible, the knowledge of good and evil comes to humanity as a Pandora's box, unleashed by the shrewd temptation of a serpent and the disobedience of the first humans. On the one hand, it gave humanity a divine attribute. On the other hand, this knowledge corrupted humanity, who, even according to Isaiah, confused good and evil (5:20). The picture, therefore, is that of a gift beyond humanity's capabilities to wield. This reality places humanity at odds with the holiness of God and invites self-annihilation unless God intervenes. This is a significant theme throughout Isaiah and it is a theme that surfaces in this passage. In Isaianic thought, the rod, the snake, and the seraphim share a paradigmatic relationship as evidenced by the parallelism of 14:29. Thus, the power to "strike the earth with the rod of his mouth" suggests a mastery over the knowledge of good and evil such that it is now a weapon in the hands of this king. In 11:8, the children fearlessly play at the lair of the snake, even placing their hands in its den, showing the impotence of the serpent in contrast to the cunning it once wielded over humanity in the Garden of Eden. In the eschaton, humanity will have overcome the threat that the knowledge of good and evil presents.

CONCLUSIONS AND NEW BEGINNINGS

There is a sense in which children embody indeterminacy, which is perhaps a reason why this text employs children as signs. The processes of deferral and displacement, active in the names of the children and also active in the oracles that seek to explicate their meanings, achieve embodiment in the very essence of the signifiers, the children. Children, more so than adults, embody the fusion of hope and fear, freedom and threat, presence and absence. Every parent

knows the anxious mix of hopes, dreams, fears, and worries that govern our intellectual and emotional parental energies.

Yet, each parent also knows the experience of deferring these hopes, dreams, fears, and worries to another day. The temporal indicators of the signs of Immanu-el and Maher-shalal-hash-baz exemplify this very process. The signifiers are not the sign—the birth of the children is a false climax. Neither is the sign the moment the child rejects the evil or chooses the good, or knows how to say אָבִי or אִמִּי. The sign is that ambiguous time marked by the temporal indicator, בְּטֶרֶם—the “before” time is the sign. This time marks the point in the life of the child when it is most vulnerable, defenceless, and exposed. It is in this time that God’s promise of salvation comes. So it is with Jerusalem and Judah too. In its most vulnerable, defenceless, and exposed hour, while under judgment, God provides oracles and signs of a new age and a new language, embodied in Shear-yashub, Immanu-el, Maher-shalal-hash-baz, and Pele-yoez-el-gibbor-avi’ad-sar-shalom.

As such, the children are not only representatives of an Israel under judgment and in need of salvation but also representatives of a new Israel. These children are the spokeschildren of a new age and a new language—a theme that links them to Isa 28:7-13. They are nourished, not with mother’s milk, but by God’s child language, *šaw řšaw qaw řqaw* (28:9-10).²⁴ They are signs to Israel (8:18). They prefigure the servant of the Lord. They are the child whom Yahweh calls in the womb with a name (49:1). They are the servant whose mouth is like a sword—a rod that will strike the earth (49:2; cf. 11:4). They are the servant in whom Yahweh will manifest his glory: “With us God,” “planner of wonders,” “Mighty God,” “Father Forever.” They are the servant who will bring back Jacob, Shear-yashub! They are the servant who will be a light to the nations, a light the people in the darkness have seen, a signal to the nations (49:6; cf. 9:1-2, 11:10). The root (שֵׁרֶשׁ) of Jesse is the root (שֵׁרֶשׁ) that grows in the sight of Yahweh (52:2; cf. 11:10). They are Israel, born of Zion (66:8-13), suckled and satisfied on her breast (66:11-12), dandled

²⁴ cf. Landy, “Construction,” 202.

(שׁעשׁע) on her knees (66:12), and the plant Yahweh cherishes (שׁעשׁע, 5:7). The state of the bet `ab, so disastrously presented in Isaiah 1, is reconciled and reconstituted. Zion is no longer a harlot but the mother of a new child, who brings justice, righteousness, good counsel, all that was absent in Isaiah 1; the father no longer exposes his children to beatings but comforts his children; and, finally, the children know their father.

Who knows what a child will do or who they will become? The incredible, historical flexibility in the resignification of the signs of the children in Isaiah, in later biblical texts, in Christian texts, in midrash exemplifies this point. To historicize the prophetic word, as so many commentators attempt to do, is to declare the failure of the prophetic word. Instead, left unanchored, the historical flexibility of these signs testifies to a more profound reality. As long as children continue to be born, there is always hope that the prophetic word can be fulfilled and so prophecy can never fail. In large part, this is Isaiah's message. Though judgment may come upon Israel and Judah, hope for salvation can never fade so long as Yahweh refuses to shut the womb. New births always hold the promise of new relationships (among humans and between humans and the divine), new realities (political, economic, social, environmental), and new worlds.

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