# Isaiah 56 – 66: An Isaianic and a Postcolonial Reading

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What are effective approaches to the interpretation of Isaiah 56 – 66?

I start from the standard critical view that these chapters form a coherent and relatively self-contained unit within the book of Isaiah, a collection of prophecies from the Second Temple period. It is also a widely-held view that the chapters are arranged as a chiasm, a concentric structure, and this is one evidence of their being a distinguishable unit within the book. Now Old Testament scholars can find chiasms under every bush, but this example looks more secure than most and in broad terms it is more widely recognized than most, though there are differing views about the details and about its significance. I outline the chapters as follows.

56:1-8 Preface: the place of foreigners in the service of Yahweh

 56:9 – 59:8 Yahweh’s challenges concerning the Jerusalem community’s life

 59:9-15a Prayers for Yahweh’s forgiveness and restoration

 59:15b-21 Vision of Yahweh acting in judgment

 60:1-22 Vision of Jerusalem restored

 61:1-9 The prophet’s commission

 61:10 – 62:12 Vision of Jerusalem restored

 63:1-6 Vision of Yahweh acting in judgment

 63:7 – 64:11 Prayers for Yahweh’s forgiveness and restoration

 65:1 – 66:17 Yahweh’s challenges concerning the Jerusalem community’s life

66:18-24 Postscript: the place of foreigners in the service of Yahweh

At the center is the prophet’s account of his call; in a chiasm there is a logic about its being located here, whereas in a more linear structure an equivalent account of a call might come at the beginning, as it does in Jeremiah and Ezekiel. Outside that center are visions of the restored Jerusalem that repeat in more glorious technicolor the kind of promises that appeared in Isaiah 40 – 55, with their concomitant promise of Yahweh’s acting in judgment on the people’s oppressors. Outside these visions are prayers that essentially plead with Yahweh to do what the visions portray. Outside these prayers is a double series of challenges and warnings about the community’s life in both its societal and worship aspects. Finally, the outer frame comprises more materials that are more miscellaneous but have in common a concern with the place of people from other nations in relation to Judah.

l will first say something about two approaches to the interpretation of the chapters that have dominated scholarly work for the past generation, then talk about two other approaches that seem to me to me more effective in opening up the chapters’ interpretation.

## A Redaction-historical Reading or a Sociological Reading

The first of the dominant approaches is a redaction-critical reading, which seeks to trace the process whereby the chapters developed and reached the form they now have. The idea of tracing this process promises much insight, but the problem is that analysts who attempt it come to quite different conclusions.

In a number of these studies of the chapters a motif recurs. One could almost call it a *Gattung* or form, as in form-criticism; specifically, it is a subset of a salvation oracle. The form has three elements. First, there is a lament, at the scholarly impasse over dating the chapters. Second, there is a prophetic claim, that the key to understanding has now been revealed. Third, there is an oracle, announcing the true answer about dating. The trouble is that when each new scholar announces his oracle (I think each time it has been “he”), it has not been received with faith by subsequent scholar-prophets. One of them will then declare that the impasse persists and will present his own suggestion regarding the way through it. The persistence of this pattern in the recent history of the chapters’ interpretation make it seem unlikely that redaction-critical study will ever generate an interpretation of the chapters as a whole that carries conviction.

One fact underlying the impasse is that Isaiah 56 – 66 differs from the other major sections of the book in not referring to any specific people or events. Its comments on political and social conditions and on the religious situation could fit many contexts. While for the most part we can surely read the chapters against the background of the Persian period, we cannot read them on the basis of relating them to particular periods within these parameters. When we seek to set them in a more precise historical context, we are working against the grain of the material, which declines to provide the information that would enable us to do what we want to do. We do not know when the prophecies were uttered. This conclusion is not a gloomy admission of defeat but an acknowledgment that opens up the possibility of focusing study on questions that we might be able to answer.

Redaction-critical approaches commonly read Isaiah 56 – 66 in light of conflicts within the Second Temple community, and analysis of these conflicts has been a second dominant approach in studying these chapters. It has been an aspect of the sociological turn in the study of the Second Temple period over the past forty years.

 The books of Ezra and Nehemiah make clear that there certainly were such conflicts within the Second Temple community, and Isaiah 56 – 66 gives considerable space to confronting other groups within the community. The scholarly world has generated two main accounts of the conflict in the Second Temple community. Morton Smith speaks of the two groups as the “Yahweh-alone party” and the “syncretistic party,”[[2]](#footnote-2) and his understanding seems to me likely to be on the right lines. More scholarly interest has attached to the work of Paul D. Hanson, who sees the conflict as involving prophets over against priests and/or people with some power who believe that God is active in the present over against people outside the power structure who can only look for God’s action in the future.[[3]](#footnote-3) Part of the background to Hanson’s work is the fact that we have little by way of hard data on the socioeconomic and political situation of Judah during the Persian period. A sociological approach to the material aims to offer aid in precisely a situation when we lack concrete historical evidence, by beginning from modern sociological theory and looking at the text in light of it. In principle, this strategy is unexceptionable, but in the case of Hanson’s theory the method seems to impose an alien interpretation on the text, which does not give an impression of representing the views of one sizeable group within the community set over against another sizeable group. It rather gives the same impression as the one suggested by preexilic prophecy, where a prophet and a small group of supporters stand over against the community as a whole. The thesis that the conflict involved prophets over against priests and/or people who believe God is active in the present over against people who can only look for God’s action in the future does not very well correspond to data within the chapters. It is an imposed understanding of the conflict. Thus Hanson’s thesis has led to lively discussion, but that is all.

## An Isaianic Reading: The Interrelationship between Two Forms of Faithfulness

I come, then, to two approaches that have more potential for the interpretation of Isaiah 56 – 66. One I might call an Isaianic reading. I shall focus on a theological question raised by such a reading, the interrelationship between two forms of faithfulness.

Scholarly study has come to a renewed awareness that Isaiah 56 – 66 needs to be understood in relation to the rest of the book of Isaiah, notwithstanding its own careful arrangement and its substantially self-contained nature. The formal nature of Isaiah 56 – 66 as part of a larger whole, not a work standing on its own, is complemented by the more substantial point that it often takes up motifs, issues, and phrases from Isaiah 1 – 55. While it also has significant links with other prophetic material, particularly in Jeremiah, the fact that Isaiah 56 – 66 appears in the same work as Isaiah 1 – 55 gives an extra level of significance to its links with those chapters. Part of the meaning of Isaiah 56 – 66 lies in the way it takes up, affirms, modifies, supplements, and ignores earlier material in the book, in bringing the book itself to a close.

Rolf Rendtorff put us on the track of the way the first verse in Isaiah 56 – 66 encapsulates much of the theological thrust of the chapters as a whole, and reflects their relationship to what precedes.[[4]](#footnote-4) In the NRSV it reads, “Maintain justice, and do what is right, for soon my salvation will come, and my deliverance be revealed.” The problem with that translation is that the word for “what is right” and for “deliverance” is the same word, the word *ṣĕdāqâ*. The Common English Bible thus has, “Do what is righteous, and my righteousness will be revealed.” It brings out the repetition of the word *ṣĕdāqâ*, but this word is a tricky one to translate (hence most versions give it different translations in the two lines), and righteousness does not work well as a translation. The idea of *ṣĕdāqâ* is of doing what is right to someone in light of your mutual commitment. It is nearer “faithfulness” than “righteousness.”

To complicate things further, the word “salvation” has distinctive theological freight for Christian readers, which makes it a misleading translation of the word *yēšû‘â*. And finally, the word NRSV translates “justice,” *mišpāṭ*, is another for which we do not have an English equivalent, but it is more a power word than a value word like “justice.” The KJV has “judgment,” and judgment can be right or wrong – hence the need to qualify *mišpāṭ* by *ṣĕdāqâ*. More broadly *mišpāṭ* suggests the exercise of authority, the taking of decisions. The hendiadys *mišpāṭ* *ûṣĕdāqâ* commonly appears in English translations as justice and righteousness. It has been described as the Hebrew equivalent of our expression “social justice,”[[5]](#footnote-5) though in English the phrase “social justice” is a hazy expression, one commonly used without much reflection on its meaning or on the relationship of this meaning to that of the Hebrew expression. The expression *mišpāṭ* *ûṣĕdāqâ* means something like the taking of decisions and the exercise of authority in a way that involves people doing right by one another and living in a way that does right by Yahweh. Such, then, is the biblical understanding of social justice, If *mišpāṭ* *ûṣĕdāqâ* is the Hebrew equivalent to social justice.

So one might try to being out the meaning of the two lines in 56:1 as follows:

Guard the exercise of authority, do what is faithful,

 because my deliverance is near coming, my faithfulness [is near] revealing itself.

These two lines about human *ṣĕdāqâ* and divine *ṣĕdāqâ* summarize much of the thrust of Isaiah 1 – 39 and 40 – 55 respectively, and also encapsulate much of the theological thrust of Isaiah 56 – 66 itself. Isaiah 1 – 39 challenged the community to take *mišpāṭ* and *ṣĕdāqâ* more seriously. The recurrence of the challenge here indicates that the exhortation still needs making. The challenge was not so historically located that it ceased to be significant for later generations. On the contrary, its appearing in Isaiah 1 – 39 in written form enables it to address subsequent generations of Israel. It makes it both possible and necessary for future generations to heed it. Indeed, the fact that the earlier community did not heed this message (and paid the penalty) places a more demanding obligation on later communities to do so.

The second line with its promise that Yahweh’s deliverance is near coming, his faithfulness near revealing itself, sums up much of the thrust of Isaiah 40 – 55, chapters that promised the community in the exilic period that God would do right by it and deliver it. These notions, too, have not lost their importance. While Isaiah 56 – 66 may be responding to disappointment with the incomplete fulfillment of the promises in Isaiah 40 – 55, they give no indication of doing so. This is not merely an argument from silence, because Isaiah 40 – 55 and Isaiah 56 – 66 are capable of expressing in no uncertain terms their disappointment with Yahweh’s action, but this opening line does not do so. The statement about God’s deliverance and faithfulness simply affirms God’s promise.

As is typical with prophetic promises (and warnings), the promises in Isaiah 40 – 55 have in fact received some measure of implementing, but nothing like as radical an implementing as one might have expected. While Yahweh has seen to the conquest of Babylon by Cyrus and to Cyrus’s encouraging Judahites to return to rebuild the temple, Judah now lives under the dominion of another imperial power and the city still stands in a devastated state. As there is no indication that the people the prophecies address felt that the prophecy of the exile had failed, so there is no indication that the critique of the community that will follow in chapters 56 – 59 explains this failure. But in the circumstances, alongside the importance of repeating the challenge to “guard authority, act in faithfulness” it is important to repeat the promises, as will happen in glorious technicolor in subsequent chapters. The promises’ partial fulfillment makes their reaffirmation both necessary and possible.

The collocation of the two lines thus summarizes what has preceded and what will follow, but it also exposes an irresolvable question about the interrelationship of the points they make. The ambiguity compares with that in the summaries of Jesus’ preaching in Matthew 3\*, “Repent, because the kingdom of heaven has come near,” and in Mark 1\*, which strikingly lacks the “because”; these provoke reflection on the same question.

Is it the case that people must pay attention to *mišpāṭ* and *ṣĕdāqâ* because Yahweh is about to act in *yĕšû‘â* and *ṣĕdāqâ*? In other words, will a life of *mišpāṭ* and *ṣĕdāqâ* be a response to a divine commitment to *yĕšû‘â* and *ṣĕdāqâ*? Or is it the case that people must pay attention to *mišpāṭ* and *ṣĕdāqâ* because only then will Yahweh act in *yĕšû‘â* and *ṣĕdāqâ*? In other words, will Yahweh’s *yĕšû‘â* and *ṣĕdāqâ* be a response to a human commitment to *mišpāṭ* and *ṣĕdāqâ*? The consequences that follow from accepting either answer to the question show why it is irresolvable. The first answer is open to implying that Yahweh is committed to acting in *yĕšû‘â* and *ṣĕdāqâ* irrespective of the community’s attitude, which stands in tension with the indications that problems with the community’s attitude are the reason why it needs deliverance. The second answer is open to implying that the community’s *mišpāṭ* and *ṣĕdāqâ* is the decisive consideration in determining whether Yahweh acts in *yĕšû‘â* and *ṣĕdāqâ*, so that the relationship between the people and Yahweh becomes a transactional or contractual one.

At first sight it might seem that interposing the conjunction “because” between the imperatives and the declarations resolves the tension between these two stances, but it does not do so. The new statement could mean “Observe *mišpāṭ*, do *ṣĕdāqâ*, because such action is necessary if I am to fulfill my promise, so that my *yĕšû’â* is near to coming, my *ṣĕdāqâ* to revealing itself.” Obedience to the command is a condition of the fulfillment of the promise. Or it could mean “Observe *mišpāṭ*, do *ṣĕdāqâ*, because such action is the only appropriate response to the fact that my *yĕšû’â* is near to coming, my *ṣĕdāqâ* to revealing itself.” If we have to choose, then the second understanding is more plausible; but there is indeed some ambiguity about the relationship between the imperatives and the declarations.

The two lines in the opening verse in Isaiah 56 – 66 do set agenda for the chapters that follow, and those chapters spell out this question further without resolving it. The chapters challenge the Judahite community to live in light of Yahweh’s promises concerning its coming restoration, which issue from Yahweh’s doing right by the community. They also challenge this community to do right in the way they live with one another. The double use of the word *ṣĕdāqâ*, both a description of what Yahweh will do in restoring the community and a word for the way the community is challenged to live, helps to make the point, and to suggest a link between the divine act and the human act. The opening verse and the succeeding chapters thus hold together in necessary fashion God’s promise and the need for the people’s response, and make a theological point whose significance is not confined to their context. Indeed, the opening verse makes no mention of the Judahite community itself and thus sets a pattern for Isaiah 56 – 66 in suggesting that its exhortation applies to the people of God in any context.

The material in Isaiah 56 – 66 as a whole incorporates no concrete historical references or dates. What is the significance of its being placed after the material that contains these? Isaiah 1 – 39 embodies Yahweh’s reaction to the situation in Judah in the eighth century and announces the divine intention regarding it, while Isaiah 40 – 55 embodies Yahweh’s reaction to the situation among Judahites in Jerusalem and/or Babylon in the mid-sixth century. (I do not imply that all the material comes from these two contexts, simply that these are the only contexts they refer to.) Located between the historical contexts to which these two blocks of material refer, the fall of Jerusalem and the exile to Babylon constitute both the solution to the problem set up by Isaiah 1 – 39 and the problem for which Isaiah 40 – 55 offers the solution. With Isaiah 55 the chapters thus come to a happy ending. The book could stop there. There is no need for anything else. Yet apparently there is. Historically we can properly interpret that need in light of the experience of Judah in the Persian period and see Isaiah 56 – 66 as speaking to that context. But the chapters’ lack of concrete reference raises the question whether there is more going on here. The chapters make a general point about the nature of Yahweh’s involvement in the world, about the nature of Yahweh’s people, and about the relationship between these two.

The chiastic arrangement of the chapters coheres with this notion and points to an understanding of the theological issues they raise. By its nature, a concentric structure has a different dynamic from a linear one like that of Isaiah 40 – 55. A concentric structure looks as if it is going somewhere but turns out to be doing something more ambiguous. Its second half may take the argument forward, as the second of two cola in a poetic line characteristically goes beyond the first in some way. There will thus be a little linearity about the structure; it is more like a spiral than a circle. But formally, Isaiah 56 – 66 ends up coming back to where it started. Like chapter 55, chapters 60 – 62 could seem the proper ending to the book of Isaiah. Isaiah 60 resumes and summarizes the book’s most central theme, Jerusalem and its destiny. It brings to a resolution problems and issues regarding the city’s place among the nations of the world that occupy a central place in the book from the beginning. But the fact that the book of Isaiah does not end with chapters 60 – 62, but continues as it does, constitutes a telling indication of the thesis that emerges from the book, and in particular from Isaiah 56 – 66. As Isaiah 1 - 55 and then the opening verse of the last eleven chapters announce, the book as a whole and these closing chapters expound two chief convictions, that Jerusalem needs to face Yahweh’s challenges about its life and that Yahweh is committed to its glorious restoration. But the last eleven chapters, like their opening verse, do not establish the relationship between these two convictions. They simply juxtapose them. They do suggest that it is an oversimplification to say that the vital thing is for Jerusalem to clean up its act, and that its restoration will then follow. But they also suggest that neither is it the case that Yahweh’s act of restoration will take place irrespective of Jerusalem’s stance in relation to Yahweh.

As the genius of Isaiah 40 – 55 is to expound theological issues by means of a linear argument, the genius of Isaiah 56 – 66 is to expound theological issues by means of this chiasm. These strategies are contextual and not interchangeable. The thrust of Isaiah 40 – 55 could not be expressed as a chiasm, whereas the thrust of Isaiah 56 – 66 could not be expressed by a linear sequence. It expounds the irresolvable tensions between challenge, prayer, and promise, between an interest in the nations that focuses on their blessing and one that focuses on Israel’s blessing, and between judgment and restoration. Such significance in a chiasm emerges when one contrasts it with a text open to deconstruction. There are texts that emphasize either divine action or human action, and it is not then surprising if readers can see the other emphasis lurking somewhere beneath the surface of the text. Indeed, this is so in Isaiah 40 – 55. The genius of a chiasm (or is it the cowardice of a chiasm?) is to avoid deconstruction by being upfront with the two assertions that stand in tension with each other. While Isaiah 40 – 55 is amenable to deconstruction without overtly inviting it, Isaiah 56 – 66 wears its deconstruction on its sleeve.

The way Isaiah 56 – 66 unfolds thus underlines the ambiguity of its opening rather than resolving it. Chapters 56 – 59 are dominated by critique of the community and by the laying down of expectations, closing with a prayer that constitutes an acknowledgment to Yahweh that this critique is fair. The expectations relate both to religious life and to ethical life. You could say that they are the outworking of what it means to observe *mišpāṭ* and do *ṣĕdāqâ*. The central chapters of Isaiah 56 – 66 then constitute promises that Yahweh intends to take action against his enemies, who are also Jerusalem’s enemies, and to restore Jerusalem and make it the world’s focus. When we reach the end of the central chapters, we might conclude that the ambiguity about the relationship of the imperatives and the declarations is solved. First put your life right; then the promises will be fulfilled. But it transpires that they are not the end of the book or of the section begun at 56:1, because there follow a further prayer that acknowledges the critique’s fairness (though it goes on to ask Yahweh to have mercy) and then two final chapters dominated by further critique of the community and by the laying down of expectations. Thus chapters 63 – 66 as a whole balance chapters 56 - 59, and dissolve any sense that the ambiguity of the opening verse has been resolved. The first and last major parts of Isaiah 56 – 66 stand in irresolvable tension with the central part. The first and last parts correspond to the thrust of Isaiah 1 – 39; the central part corresponds to the thrust of Isaiah 40 – 55. Isaiah 56 – 66 articulates the inherent tension between Isaiah 1 – 39 and Isaiah 40 – 55; it does not resolve it.

The chiastic structure of Isaiah 56 – 66 thereby makes a theological point. The material’s omission to resolve the tension at issue is not a failure but a recognition of a question that cannot be resolved. It is not possible to say that Jerusalem’s deliverance is conditional on its obedience or that Yahweh is unconditionally committed to its deliverance. The legal or contractual framework for understanding the relationship does not work.

A more illuminating model for understanding the relationship implied by the book of Isaiah is that of marriage, at least as often understood in the West. When two people commit themselves to each other in marriage, their commitment presupposes that it is mutual. Yet we would not say either “I commit myself to you without knowing whether you are committing yourself to me” or “I commit myself to you on condition that you commit yourself to me,” and if the couple think in terms of conditional commitment, they need to postpone the wedding to give them time to talk things through with a therapist. Rather the relationship is covenantal, and both parties make a commitment that presupposes the commitment of the other without being exactly dependent on it. The mutuality of commitment is a kind of logical necessity or a definitional necessity rather than a legal necessity. Such is also the nature of the relationship between Yahweh and Israel (and between God and his church).

## A Post-colonial Reading: God and Empire

My other way into to a more effective reading of Isaiah 56 – 66 is post-colonial. I apologize for taking up this fashionable approach, which will be old hat in a decade or two like the hermeneutical fashions of the 1970s or 1980s, but like them may retain some significance even when it has ceased to be a scholarly fad. An illuminating study of the book of Nahum, written (significantly) in South Africa, characterized the book as resistance literature, which as such compares with anti-apartheid literature.[[6]](#footnote-6) Nahum invites people in Judah to believe that the Assyrian empire will fall. In the years after Assyria has done so, reading Nahum would invite subsequent generations to believe that the same truth applies to Babylon, the empire of its own day, and Isaiah 40 – 55 picks up Nahum’s promises in declaring that Babylon is indeed about to fall.[[7]](#footnote-7) The form of the prophecies in Nahum, with the paucity of their specific references to Nineveh or Assyria (modern translations are inclined to add to the allusions to Nineveh and Assyria to make their original reference more explicit), encourages this process of reapplication. The paucity of specific references to Babylon in Isaiah 40 – 55 has the same effect on its reading. The entire absence of specific references in Isaiah 56 – 66 makes the point even more strongly. A pattern in Yahweh’s dealings with the world keeps asserting itself in these prophecies.

Western scholarship has regarded Nahum as unpleasantly nationalistic, and one can see the ideological reasons why it has done so. Nahum’s declarations about the empire’s fate constitute a threat to the imperial powers to which scholars in Britain and the United States belong. The same dynamics appear in scholarly study of Isaiah 56 – 66. Scholars like the “universalism” of passages such as chapter 56 with its reference to the temple as a place of prayer for all nations, but dislike the “nationalism” of passages such as chapter 60 with its picture of the nations bowing down to Jerusalem. They especially dislike the bloodthirsty nature of the visions of judgment in chapters 59 and 63.

In broad terms, one could describe Judah as a colonial entity for its entire life. It was always under some form of control by a bigger power. But in the Persian period it was more like a colony in a stricter sense. While it did not have a community of people from the imperial center living in its midst, it was a subordinate part of an empire that projected itself as benign and benevolent and allowed Judah to have some control of internal affairs, but Judah did not have its own king and lived under the oversight of a governor responsible to the imperial administration, to which it paid taxes.

Like the rest of Isaiah, and like Nahum and other prophetic books, Isaiah 56 – 66 does not urge Judah to rebel against the superpower. One could call it quietist in stance. Further, whereas Isaiah 13 has spoken of the Medes bringing destruction upon Babylon, when Isaiah 56 – 66 speaks of the destruction of “the nations” – a term that commonly denotes the superpower of the day – it attributes the destruction to direct action by Yahweh. Yahweh is, indeed, aggrieved that there is no would-be next superpower itching to take Persia’s place, which he can use as he used Assyria, Babylon, and Persia itself (see 59:15b-19; 63:1-6). Whereas a prophet in the 540s had Cyrus to envisage as the means whereby Yahweh’s will could be fulfilled, and Yahweh could work by means of him, there is no such power emerging in the period to which Isaiah 56 – 66 belongs. One should hardly see this prophet as inferior to his predecessor in this connection;[[8]](#footnote-8) if there is no Cyrus to hand, this fact is God’s responsibility, not that of God’s representative. (For all the references to Yahweh’s raising up Assyria, Babylon, and Persia, their emergence is entirely explicable in historical terms; no supernatural intervention was involved. Yahweh usually works via historical processes.)

Yahweh promises a restoring of Jerusalem that will come about by Yahweh’s action. Like Nahum, Isaiah 56 – 66 aims at a process of conscientization, consciousness-raising, whereby the subordinate power can cut the imperial power down in its thinking, pending the day when Yahweh cuts it down politically. One could say that all Isaiah 56 – 66 does is encourage hope and encourage prayer, but these are frightening actions. It would be easy for Judah to believe that Yahweh had forgotten it and was not after all the kind of faithful God who puts things right in the world. Isaiah 56 – 66 declares that Yahweh is that God. Unlike Nahum, it does not see Judah’s imperial overlord as a great oppressor. Perhaps it recognizes the ambiguity of this overlord, in keeping with the overlord’s shrewd policy. According to Ezra-Nehemiah, people in Judah did complain about the crippling tax burdens imposed by the imperial authorities, but it was those same imperial authorities that facilitated the return of Judahites to Jerusalem, the rebuilding of the temple, and the missions of Ezra and Nehemiah; they also supported Judah’s independence over against surrounding provinces of the Persian Empire. The imperial policies of divide and rule and of playing both good cop and bad cop worked well.

The vision of the empire’s future in Isaiah 56 – 66 thus has a different profile from that in Isaiah 1 – 55 or other prophets. In Isaiah 56 – 66 “The empire writes back,” but not so much “with a vengeance” (the title of a famous article by Salman Rushdie in the London *Times*,July 3, 1982), as it does in Nahum. But like Nahum, Isaiah 56 – 66 does not write back “to the centre” (as an adapted version of the phrase goes on),[[9]](#footnote-9) like an author such as Rushdie writing for British consumption. It writes for its own community. The chapters presuppose the classic colonial experiences of powerlessness and exaction of resources, and promise their community that these will not last forever. In doing so, the chapters decline to use the empire’s language. As far as Persia is concerned, the province centering on Jerusalem is called Yehud, the name that appears on coins from the period[[10]](#footnote-10) and also in Western scholarly study.[[11]](#footnote-11) Isaiah 56 – 66 refers once to Judah, eleven times to Jerusalem, never to Yehud. The chapters hold onto the Judahites’ own way of looking at Judah and Jerusalem.

The central chapters of Isaiah 56 – 66, especially chapter 60, illustrate how poetic form contributes to encouragement and consciousness-raising. Powerful poetry can emerge from a subject society, as happens in Nahum. The imagery and hyperbole of Isaiah 56 – 66 in describing Jerusalem’s transformation and the reversal of positions between its people and its overlords creates before people’s imagination a different world from the one people currently experience, and promises that this world will become a reality.

As well as containing no encouragement to rebellion, the chapters contain no exhortation to bring about the transformation of Jerusalem; they thus differ from Haggai and Nehemiah. They simply promise that what must have seemed impossible will become actual. Reliefs in the palace that Darius I began to build at his new capital, Persepolis, in the last decades of the sixth century portray peoples bringing tribute to the king, as Judah did.[[12]](#footnote-12) The prophet declares that Persia is going to pay tribute to Yahweh in Jerusalem. It is an aspect of the great reversal whereby the superpower and its kings turn from contempt to obeisance.

Isaiah 56 – 66 recognizes the tensions in perspective between different groups within the colonial entity. In the twenty-first century world, people from former colonies all over the world (including many of their most able people) migrate to North America and Europe[[13]](#footnote-13) and leave their home countries without the resources that could have contributed to their development. In addition, many of these post-colonial countries are riven by strife, partly issuing from divisions that go back to the work of the imperial powers that created artificial nations out of diverse groups. Isaiah 56 – 66 recognizes parallel realities. Many Judahites had not seized the opportunity to return to this backwater of the empire. Isaiah 60 – 62 promises that they will do so. Judah is riven by strife between people with different religious commitments; Isaiah 56 – 59 and 65 – 66 promises not that they will come to live in peace and tolerance but that this situation will not continue. The people it sees as compromised in their Yahwism will disappear; Judah will become a proper Yahweh-worshiping community. This religious perspective links with another aspect of the vision of a restored Jerusalem. Resources come to the city not simply to beautify it as a city but to resource the worship of its temple.

Christian lectionaries set the beginning of Isaiah 60 for Epiphany and thus link the chapter with the story of eastern sages bringing Jesus gold, incense, and myrrh (Matt 2:1-12). Cyril of Alexandria waxes lyrical on the way “it is as though the promise that Israel will be saved had already been fulfilled” and adds that the prophet “all but says that Christ, who was long ago predicted by the law and the holy prophets, was already present among them and now at the end of the age has shone on all who dwell on earth.”,[[14]](#footnote-14) While the recurrence of reference to gold and incense constitutes a verbal link between the two passages, there is insufficient correspondence between the two passages for it to be possible to think of Isaiah 60 as a “prediction” of which the coming of the sages is the “fulfillment.” The New Testament itself does not relate the prophecy and the event; it makes its link with Micah 5.

Admittedly the subsequent explicit Christian juxtaposing of Isaiah 60 and Matthew 2 does do justice to the nature of Isaiah 60 better than does a reading that envisages Isaiah 60 as essentially picturing the way a prophet expects political events to unfold at the end of the sixth century or in the fifth. For all the sense in which the chapters may be seen as resistance literature, they are poetic, lyrical, and hyperbolic in their language. Isaiah 60 is typical of Isaiah 56 – 66 in not relating its promises to specific political contexts or events. Like anything that anyone ever says or writes, it relates to a particular historical context in the sense that it emerges from such a context and reflects it. But both the attempt to see it as envisaging fulfillment in such a context and the understanding of it as a prediction of a particular event six centuries later miss the significance of its poetic nature.

In Isaiah 61, the central chapter of the central complex of chapters in Isaiah 56 – 66, the prophet declares himself to be someone “anointed” by Yahweh. It is an unexpected expression, because anointing is a rite applied to kings and priests as holders of an office. Being a prophet is not an office, and prophets are not anointed (Yahweh’s commission of Elijah to anoint Elisha tests but does not disprove the rule). The only anointed king in Isaiah is Cyrus, and the prophet’s claiming an anointing may thus constitute a “strong rereading”[[15]](#footnote-15) of the commendation of Cyrus in Isaiah 40 – 55. This prophet has a part to play in the fulfilling of the role that was once destined for the Persian deliverer who has become the Persian overlord. He claims a commission to bring good news to people who are afflicted, broken in spirit, captives, prisoners, people who mourn Zion; they will have reason for joy. The commission is ambiguous about whether they are the people who will do the building of Jerusalem of which it speaks; the prophecy earlier envisaged foreigners doing this work (60:10), and perhaps its point is simply that some people will. The significant point is that the work will be done. Once again there is a link with Cyrus, who was earlier the person destined to do the work (45:13).

In the decades and centuries that followed, the people of Yahweh did not see these promises much more fulfilled than they had been through the work of Cyrus, which was one reason why it was possible for Jesus to take up chapter 61, a favorite passage in his day. Pre-critical Christian commentaries naturally assume that Isaiah 61 is a prophecy of the Messiah; not only so, but Jürgen Moltmann declares that here “Trito Isaiah, finally, sees the coming messiah as quintessential bearer of the Spirit.”[[16]](#footnote-16) Jesus indeed tells the people in the Nazareth synagogue that “today this scripture is fulfilled in your ears.” But his statement is more suggestive and allusive than is often assumed. “Fulfilled” is *plēro-ō*, which is not a kind of technical term like the English word “fulfilled” butthe ordinary Greek word for “filled.” While “filling” a passage of scripture might mean fulfilling it, it might also imply something like filling it out. The use of *plēro-ō* need not imply that the passage in question was a prediction or promise with a one-to-one relationship to a subsequent event. Indeed, what Jesus is doing with Isaiah 61 is something not unlike what Isaiah 61 was doing with passages from Isaiah 40 – 55. He is using scriptural material to interpret his own significance and to make a claim for that significance at least as much as using his own significance to interpret Isaiah 61.

Jesus’ ministry did not result in the fulfillment of these promises in Isaiah 60 – 62, and liberty of the kind that the prophet envisaged has no more been enjoyed by the church than it has been enjoyed by Israel. On the other hand, it is not the case that nothing of this kind took place in Second Temple Judaism and then during Jesus’ ministry and in the life of the church. Here again we see the pattern whereby the proclamations of the Prophets do not find complete fulfillment but do find some fulfillment. Like other prophecies, Isaiah 61 represents a re-expression of God’s ultimate purpose for Israel and for the world, for which the Judahites of the prophet’s day could expect to see some fulfillment (as they did), but of which they might not be surprised to find they did not see the complete fulfillment.

Reading Isaiah 56 – 66 in light of Jesus thus illumines some aspects of the chapters, but encourages us to ignore many aspects of its inherent theological significance. A post-colonial reading brings out theological significance in the chapters that we might otherwise not note. It suggests insight on the relationship of colonial peoples to the imperial center and adds to the considerable material in the Old Testament that offers illumination on God’s attitude to superpowers, a question that could have been of crucial importance to peoples such as Britain and the United States, but that Christian interpretation has grievously missed.

1. An address to the conference of the Australian and New Zealand Association of Theological Schools in Brisbane, July 4, 2012. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See *Palestinian Politics and Parties that Shaped the Old Testament* (New York: Columbia UP, 1971; reprinted London: SCM, 1987); also Bernhard Lang, ‘Die Jahwe-allein-Bewegung’, in Lang (ed.), *Der einzige Gott* (Munich: Kösel, 1981), p. 47-83; ET in Lang, *Monotheism and the Prophetic Minority* (Sheffield: Almond, 1983), pp. 13-56. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See *The Dawn of Apocalyptic* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. “Jesaja 56,1 als Schlüssel für die Komposition des Buches Jesaja,” in Rendtorff, *Kanon und Theologie* (Neukirchen: Neukirchener, 1991), pp. 172-79; ET *Canon and Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), pp. 181-89. See also Bernard Gosse, “Isaïe 56 – 59,” *Henoch* 19 (1997), pp. 267-81 (pp. 276-78); John S. Oswalt, “Righteousness in Isaiah,” in Craig C. Broyles and Craig A. Evans (eds.), *Writing and Reading the Scroll of Isaiah* (Leiden/New York: Brill, 1997) 1.177-91; Gregory J. Polan, “Still More Signs of Unity in the Book of Isaiah: The Significance of Third Isaiah,” in *Society of Biblical Literature 1997 Seminar Papers* (Atlanta: Scholars, 1997), pp. 224-33. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See Wilhelm J. Wessels, “Nahum,” *Old Testament Essays* 11 (1998), pp. 615-28. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. As Hanson implies: see e.g., *The Dawn of Apocalyptic*, pp.\* [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. See e.g., Charles E. Carter, *The Emergence of Yehud in the Persian Period* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), pp. 142, 268-69. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. See also e.g., Diana V. Edelman and Ehud Ben Zvi,\* *The Production of Prophecy: Constructing Prophecy and Prophets in Yehud* (London/Oakville, CN: Equinox, 2009); Jeremiah J. Cataldo, *A Theocratic Yehud?* (New York/London: Clark, 2009). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. See Brent Strawn, ‘“A World under Control,”’ in Jon L. Berquist (ed.), *Approaching Yehud* (Atlanta: SBL, 2007), pp. 85-116 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. And Australasia, I hypothesized in the oral version of this paper. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. *Εξηγησις υπομνηματικη εις τον προφητην Ησαιαν* column 1321, as translated by Hollerich, *Isaiah Interpreted by Early Christian and Medieval Commentators* (\*), p. 46. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. *Der Geist des Lebens* (Munich: Kaiser, 1991), pp. 66-67; ET *The Spirit of Life* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), p. 53 [↑](#footnote-ref-16)