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# Utopia and Dystopia in Prophetic Literature

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*Ehud Ben Zvi*

## **Introduction**

This is the seventh volume that has arisen out of the work of the Prophetic Texts and Their Ancient Contexts (PTAC) group of the Society of Biblical Literature.<sup>1</sup> This group serves as a “meeting place” for scholars who wish to deal with some basic issues concerning the study of prophetic texts (and books) in their ancient context. It aims to foster dialogue among a wide variety of approaches and viewpoints and by doing so to contribute to the development of knowledge through interaction and conversation. The present volume contains revised versions of papers presented at the 2004 session of the group as well as additional contributions on the theme. It also reflects, though indirectly, the vivid discussion that took place at that meeting and its aftermath. Above all, it is an invitation for a conversation.

The theme of the volume is “Utopia and Dystopia in Prophetic Literature.” It was selected because there was a clear sense that approaching this literature with questions of “Utopia” and “Dystopia” in mind may bring to the forefront important literary and ideological aspects of prophetic texts or their messages, as well as shed light on the social circumstances in which these texts were produced and read, and their

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<sup>1</sup> The other volumes are, *Writings and Speech in Israelite and Ancient Near Eastern Prophecy* (ed. E. Ben Zvi and M. H. Floyd; SBLSymS 10; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2000); *‘Every City Shall Be Forsaken’: Urbanism and Prophecy in Ancient Israel and the Near East* (ed. L. L. Grabbe and R. D. Haak; JSOTSup 330; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001); *The Changing Face of Form Criticism for the Twenty-first Century* (ed. M. A. Sweeney and E. Ben Zvi, Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2003); *Knowing the End from the Beginning: The Prophetic, The Apocalyptic, and their Relationships* (ed. L. L. Grabbe and R. D. Haak; JSPSup 46; London and New York: T & T Clark, 2003); *The Priests in the Prophets: The Portrayal of Priests, Prophets and Other Religious Specialists in the Latter Prophets* (ed. L. L. Grabbe and A. Ogden Bellis; JSOTSup 408; London and New York, T & T Clark, 2003); and *Prophets, Prophecy, and Prophetic Texts in Second Temple Judaism* (ed. M. H. Floyd and R. D. Haak (LHBOTS/JSOTSup 427; New York & London: T & T Clark, 2006).

roles within society and the discursive worlds of which they were an integral part.

Although the focus is on the prophetic books of the Hebrew Bible, that is, ancient Israelite prophetic literature, two chapters deal with other ancient Near Eastern cultures and their historical circumstances. Another chapter (Boda's) approaches visions in Haggai and Zechariah 1-8 in the light of ancient Near Eastern texts and rituals associated with rebuilding temples. Studies on, and conversations about Ancient Israel should be informed by our understanding of social and cultural phenomena in the area. Certainly, utopia and dystopia were *not* unique to ancient Israel.

Turning to the latter and its written texts, it is obvious that utopian and dystopian images appear not only in its prophetic literature, but in other literary genres, within the repertoire of books accepted as authoritative in ancient Israel. Although this book focuses on prophetic literature, many of the arguments advanced here bear implications for the study of utopian and dystopian images in ancient Israel in general. This is so because (a) many of the main features of these images—see following chapters—are not genre dependant and (b) the historical fact that these images emerge within a (basically) common setting. Although some of the arguments advanced here adumbrate possible ways of analyzing utopian and dystopian images outside prophetic literature and hint at its possible implications for understanding intellectual discourses in ancient Israel, a full development of these issues stands clearly outside the scope of this volume. Hopefully, the present work will provide an impetus for more research and increased dialogue on these matters.

As usual, contributors were not asked to follow a “preferred” approach, or to focus on a narrow set of texts or issues, within the general constraints of the theme. Moreover, each chapter stands on its own. The “conversation” aimed at in this volume requires each of the participants to speak with her or his own and separate voice. The readers of the volume would easily notice some emerging shared themes, ways in which the contents of one chapter may inform those of another. They would also notice some differences of opinion and cases in which even similar methodologies and premises lead to somewhat different conclusions.

The volume contains fourteen self-standing, though related chapters. The principles governing the order of these chapters are simple,

though by necessity somewhat arbitrary. The journey begins with an essay by Steven Schweitzer—who has recently championed the heuristic usefulness of utopian studies for biblical studies. He provides an introductory summary of recent studies in utopian (and dystopian) literary studies along with his own definitions of utopia, utopianism, and related terms.<sup>2</sup> The chapter includes a selected bibliography that will be useful for those who would like to taste more of the fruit of utopian studies.

The next two chapters deal with evidence of utopian (or dystopian) thinking and imagery in ancient Near Eastern societies other than ancient Israel and by doing so, implicitly or explicitly inform the debate about utopian visions and thinking in the latter. Jack Sasson comments briefly on the nature of utopia (and dystopia) and then surveys various manifestations of utopian and dystopian visions or imagery in (ancient) Mesopotamia. As per the title of his contribution, the chapter pays particular attention to their manifestations in Mari and especially to those in prophecies “and other vehicles by which to channel the will of God.” He concludes “that in Mari, the yearning is not quite for utopia in our modern sense and the dread is hardly for a human-centred dystopia. Rather, the focus is on elaborating paths that lead to one or away from the other. These paths may not always be clearly charted, but in the messages received from the gods, one may find hints on how to tread on their soil.”

Matthew Neujahr focuses on a very different set of texts, the Akkadian *ex eventu* Prophecies,<sup>3</sup> and in particular on their references to the “future coming of a native dynast” who will restore the proper functioning of the cult/temple and “institute an age of peace and plenty.” He argues that these texts provide a clear ideological parallel to (non-eschatological) expectations of a royal messiah as manifested, among others, in the books of Haggai and Zechariah. By doing so, Neujahr opens a conversation that will continue in the last three chapters, which focus on aspects of these books.

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<sup>2</sup> Schweitzer’s application of these methods to Second Zechariah is developed in another chapter, which along with the contributions by Neujahr, Boda and Floyd provides new perspectives on the books of Haggai and Zechariah and their utopian visions.

<sup>3</sup> That is, the texts that have been referred in research by names such as “Akkadian Prophecies,” “Akkadian Apocalypses,” “Akkadian Literary Predictive Texts.”

Most of the volume consists of individual chapters that focus on particular prophetic books, sets of prophetic books, literary units or motifs. These chapters are preceded by my own contribution, which is meant to serve as a general introduction to the study of utopian visions in prophetic literature, in their historical context/s. I argued elsewhere that “images of an ideal future are significant indicators of the horizon of thoughts, dreams, desires, fears, and self-understanding of the community in which they develop.” Accordingly, I argued that “one may open a most significant window into the world of the community whose future is addressed, as well as their understanding of themselves when one examines... the way in which people approach the issue of describing the future.” I advanced these positions in relation to a study of the book of Micah.<sup>4</sup> Of course, these observations should be examined and elaborated within the larger context of both prophetic literature and of utopian literature in their respective social contexts. The present volume as a whole contributes much to this endeavour. Within the limits of a chapter, I contributed to this general goal by dealing with broad considerations about the importance and the social and ideological roles of utopian visions in prophetic books, as well as with the possible uses of utopian imagery in prophetic books for the reconstruction of the intellectual setting in which these books were composed and originally read. In addition, I bring to the forefront matters of diversity and multiplicity within the corpus and in society. Multiple visions of the ideal future are ubiquitous in prophetic literature. In fact, their multiplicity is a significant systemic feature in the discourses reflected in and shaped by the prophetic books, and this being so, its study requires a corresponding, systemic/broad range approach. Thus, my chapter addresses (and attempts to respond to) questions such as why, instead of developing a basically unified image of the utopian future, did the literati responsible for these books develop, read and reread multiple and seemingly contradictory images, at times even within the same book? What does this multiplicity of utopian images teach us about the societies that produced and were the primary “consumers” of them? And what do all these observations tell us about these literati and their social and ideological world?

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<sup>4</sup> E. Ben Zvi, *Micah* (FOTL 21B; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2000); citation from p. 88.

The order of the chapters that focus on particular prophetic books, sets of prophetic books, literary units or motifs with particular case studies reflects for no other reason than practicality a quite canonical order, but those dealing with the books included among the twelve are preceded by a contribution that deals with these twelve books. To be sure, this contribution (O'Brien's) has implications for all prophetic books. In fact, it seems to me that all contributions inform and shed light on texts other than those being analyzed in detail in the particular essay, and on other contributions in this volume, as readers will easily recognize.

Kathleen O'Connor's essay opens this section of the book. Her contribution is informed by utopian studies, contemporary disaster and trauma studies, and by studies on memory. She brings to the forefront and outlines the two futures that the book of Jeremiah presents: a dystopian future of catastrophe, which stands in the past of the implied readers, and an utopian future that is still in their future. She argues that both the utopian and the dystopian future portrayed in the book generate healing and hope for people whose society and even cosmos have collapsed. Jeremiah's utopian vision "enflames possibility and awakens emotional yearning for a better world." It is "both a critique of the inertia of the present and a work of transformation that unleashes energy for new forms of life." The dystopian future is above all restorative. In a multifaceted way, it serves those in deep need of healing from their traumatic experience of loss and losses. It allows them, among others, to relive their experiences, reconstitute reality through memory, grieve, blame themselves—which is a coping strategy that implies the possibility of agency—and provides them with speech to reconstitute a past that in turn serves as "a resource for conceiving the future."

James Crenshaw provides a very insightful, thought-provoking study of Jer 17:5-11, in the light of, among others, conceptually related (other) ancient near Eastern sources, wisdom and other texts in the HB, the literary context of Jer 17:5-11 within the book, and J. Z. Smith's distinction between locative and utopian worldviews. Notably, he opens his contribution with

The ordering of society into two distinct camps made up respectively of sinners and righteous is perhaps the greatest break with reality in the Bible. Truly utopian, this fictional society is constructed to bestow comfort on those whose religious values have lost their



appeal for a significant number of people. The irony of such a worldview appears to have escaped detection: this construction of reality co-exists with a view of radical, indeed innate, perversity of will...

And he concludes it with:

The entire unit, Jer 17:5-11, is therefore understandable as a many-faceted, albeit brief, treatise on idolatry, but it can also be viewed as whistling in the dark. The utopian picture of a well-ordered universe in which people who use their ingenuity to secure existence are doomed to atrophy and those who place their trust in a transcendent power only prosper is not borne out in real life. Precisely because the human intellect is perverse, claims like these cannot be trusted. That also goes for human assertions cloaked in the garment of deity, especially when their purpose is to strengthen a non-existent principle of justice by defending YHWH's all-seeing eye. Just as the popular knowledge of the habits of partridges was erroneous, the observation that wealth unjustly acquired does not long benefit its new owner is seldom accurate. The discrete units therefore present utopian understandings of reality in ancient Judah. The irony is that they also highlight the incurable intellect that constructs such fantasy.

These conclusions bear clear implications for the study of utopian visions in prophetic literature (and elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible), and for the ways in which "the other" is often construed in these visions. They also raise important issues concerning the self understanding of those who create and through reading and rereading partake in them

Hanna Liss studies the role of the written vision of the temple in terms of utopia and u-topia. She approaches the vision of the new temple in Ezekiel 40–48 (esp. 40–43) as an example of "fictional literature." She points out some elements present in this text (and in the Priestly Code) that serve as "constitutive signs of literary fiction" (such as "chronological time patterns," "stereotyped language-patterns," "expressions of spatial dimensions to symbolize non-spatial relations," "emblematic terms and names," and "relevant inconsistencies") and above all, she discusses the ideological meanings created and communicated by central elements (e.g., the "fictionalized chronology" of Ezek 40:1, the symbolic architecture described in the text) of this literary fiction. Liss emphasizes that whereas no command is ever given to build such a temple, there is a clear command to write the vision. Ac-

ording to Liss, this is just what one would expect; since the temple “should never be built.” The literary account “replaces reality, taking place in the realm of history, by a reality in the ‘realm of the text’.” Put in another way, “[t]he three-dimensional U-topia of a temple ... becomes a literary utopia.” And it must be so, since “only a ‘literary temple’ guarantees that the place and its holiness will never be violated again.”

Julia O’Brien brings contemporary feminist approaches and debates to bear on the central theme of this book. She raises the very important question of gender. She asks, “Does gender remain in an utopian future? Are masculine and feminine ‘performances’ limited to those identified as female or male?” She poses these questions to a reading of the twelve prophets, “due to their size, not due to a judgment regarding their essential unity.” Her study addresses passages that deal with the shape of the ideal, utopian future, and also those that deal with the transition from the present to that future. She discusses ideological topoi such as “weak female/powerful male rescuer,” “feminized enemy,” “honour,” “the peaceful, inhabited city,” as well as references to male institutions in the ideal future. In addition, O’Brien’s contribution provides her readers with a detailed examination of Mic 4:1–5:3 as a case study for the future of gender in the twelve.

Philip Davies explores the topos of the “wilderness period” and its social relevance. In some texts, the period is construed as a past utopia; in others, as a dystopia characterized by sinning, rebellion, idolatry or the like. Moreover, images of the period, at times, serve as prototypes of either utopian or dystopian futures. The book of Hosea constitutes his main case study, but he deals with this topos in the books of Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the Pentateuchal books. Davies addresses the relevant cases and examines the basic, conceptual attributes associated with the concept/s of wilderness in Israel. He raises a central, historical question: What is at stake in the diametrically opposed constructions of the wilderness period? Why was the period valued so differently? A key to approach these questions rests on the (partial) association of “wilderness” with “exile” in Persian Yehud, and particularly among its literate class of authors and readers of written texts—to which he relates these books. The positions advanced by Davies, and particularly his conclusion bear substantial implications for an understanding of the

social processes involved in the production of prophetic literature in Yehud.

Marvin Sweeney writes about a scholarly dystopianization of utopian prophetic literature. The book of Amos, and particularly Am 9:11-15 provide him a primary example. He argues not only that many of the assumptions governing attempts to identify the authentic oracular material of Amos (and other pre-exilic prophetic figures) are problematic (e.g., an “oracle can not be taken individually... but as a component of a larger well-designed text”), but also that they lead to readings of the text and reconstructions of the prophet that are markedly “skewed.” In particular he takes issue with the well-attested portrayal of pre-exilic characters as speakers who offered only doom to their audiences, which in this case leads to a characterization of Amos 9:11-15 as secondary. Sweeney points at the problematic character of both the premises and the results of such approaches (e.g., the pre-exilic prophetic figures end up being characterized as “relatively powerless and ineffective” figures). In addition a host of moral questions concerning the prophet and the divine arise from these common portrayals. Sweeney surveys previous studies on Am 9:11-15 and the grounds on which this text was considered secondary to an original one concerned only with doom. After rejecting these proposals *and* the premises underlying them, Sweeney proposes a primary setting for Am 9:11-15 in the mid-eight century and reconstructs its original religio-political goals against the background of the heavy demands imposed on Judah, and particularly Judahite farmers, by Israel during the dynasty of Jehu. Sweeney notes, however, that following the fall of Jerusalem and the Davidic dynasty, “later generations of readers would have understood this text to refer to an eschatological age of restoration with all of its attendant consequences for understanding ‘the fallen sukkah of David.’”

As Sweeney (and see also Floyd’s contribution) Daniel L. Smith-Christopher deals both with a text and its history of interpretation, with an eye on the premises that govern it. He deals with one of best known visions of the future in prophetic literature (and the Hebrew Bible as a whole), namely that present in Mic 4:1-4//Isa 2:2-4.<sup>5</sup> The famous passage about swords becoming plowshares has been understood as a “startling vision of peace” but also as a vision of a future “Pax Israel”

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<sup>5</sup> His focus is on the version in the book of Micah.

enforced upon the other nations, that is, a “piece of self-serving propaganda in the context of a dream of world domination and power.” Given the tendency towards appeals to readings of the text in its (literary) context as a way to adjudicate the “actual” meaning of the text, Smith-Christopher surveys such appeals and their actual results and forcefully demonstrates that the borders that scholars set for what constitutes the “proper” literary context<sup>6</sup> to be taken into account determines to a large extent the end-result of their investigations. He also takes issue with the traditional understanding of “utopian” as impossible and therefore, perhaps less than serious or without “ethically actionable power,” which is particularly relevant to the interpretation of this passage when it is understood as pointing to a non-violent, magnificent vision of peace.

Mark Boda’s chapter opens a set of three chapters that deal in different ways with the books of Haggai and Zechariah, or texts or sections thereof. In some ways it is reminiscent of Neujahr’s contribution. As the former it surveys a particular set of ancient Near Eastern texts and uses them to inform particular aspects of the books of Haggai and Zechariah. Boda deals with accounts of temple restoration, and the rituals involved. He points out evidence of influence of the general ancient Near Eastern representations of and rituals related to the reconstruction of fallen sanctuaries in Haggai and Zechariah 1–8,<sup>7</sup> including connections at the level of ideology and particularly so in terms of the relation between blessing/curse and temple building. He concludes that “[t]he prophecies in Haggai and Zechariah directly associated with phases related to temple restoration reveal a consistent focus on the

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<sup>6</sup> E.g., around Micah chapter 4, Micah chapters 4 and 5, the entire book of Micah, the twelve read as a collection (with, for instance, emphasis on Joel 3:10, or on Joel 3:10 and Zech 8:20-23), Mic 4:1-4 and Isa 2:2-4, the entire corpus of prophetic books or its main theological themes—however defined, a corpus of texts that includes ancient Near Eastern treaty texts or any combination of the above.

<sup>7</sup> Following Ellis, he presents a form-critical overview of the construction as construed in this corpus, with a particular focus on the earlier stages. Thus he details the ways in which the following are represented in these texts: (a) the decision to build; (b) the preparation of the building site and material; (c) laying the foundations; and (d) the latter stages, including dedication festivities. Then he analyses texts in Haggai and Zechariah within the same framework (e.g., Haggai 1 and Zech 1:7-17 correspond to “the decision” and Zech 4:6b-10a and Hag 2:1-23 to “preparation and foundation laying.”)

transition from dystopia to utopia, a transition that is typified mainly by a transition from material curse to material blessing, but which does offer glimpses of hope for an upheaval on a political and military level.” Moreover, he maintains that by associating utopia with temple restoration, these texts focus “the attention on their community on a specific, definable activity that was achievable in a limited period of time” and accordingly, impose “a temporary myopia on their community as a strategy for dealing with life under the hegemony of a great power... [s]uch short-sighted focus on the temple project enabled the community to concentrate and combine their efforts in the midst of the present dystopia in hopes of the inauguration of their utopia.”

Steven Schweitzer’s chapter on utopian and dystopian images in Zechariah 9–14 offers an example of what an approach based on literary utopian theory may look like and the results it may achieve. In this sense, this chapter completes his presentation in the opening chapter by providing an application of his heuristic approach. Schweitzer dwells on new perspectives gained on three significant themes that strongly participate in the utopian and dystopian images in Zechariah 9–14: (a) militarism and peace; (b) condemnation of the past and present leadership, and (c) transformations: geography, ecology and religion. Among his conclusions, “the three major themes... are not uniform in their content, so that they do not produce a single picture of a different future... [t]his multi-faceted construction of *a better alternative reality* draws heavily from both contemporary circumstances and a wealth of traditional materials that link the present with the past... the foremost concern of these chapters is not *understanding* the present in light of the past” but to reinterpret past traditions and reject the present situation in order to articulate hope for a different future.” Schweitzer maintains that “Second Zechariah *is* the result of social and ideological conflict” and proposes a social location for the group whose positions are advanced in the text, namely people “associated with the temple cult and concerned with issues of ritual holiness, those who believed themselves to be powerless to produce the type of changes desired especially in their apparently small numbers, those familiar with and affirming of the Deuteronomistic ideology, those who believed in the primacy of Jerusalem, and those who were not part of the contemporary leadership or at least the highest level of leadership.” Thus Schweitzer’s analysis contributes also to the ongoing debate about the existence of

separate social groups (parties?) in the Persian period or its close aftermath.<sup>8</sup>

Michael Floyd closes this collection by raising questions about both a common position about the origin of utopian visions and particularly so in relation to Zechariah, and sociology of knowledge. He revisits, questions, and rejects the widely-known position that utopian prophecies are to be explained as “a reaction to unfulfilled prophecies concerning the restoration.” He asks “why would such a great significance... be attributed to failed prophecies?” and questions the ways in which dissonance theory has been applied to the matter. But Floyd goes further and raises the question of whether the so-called failed prophecies of restoration mentioned above “were really perceived to have failed in the first place.” The conclusion reached by his analysis of the book of Zechariah as a case study<sup>9</sup> is clearly negative. Not only that the prophecies examined here were not perceived as failed, but the rhetorical effect of the text depended on their being perceived as fulfilled. Thus, the example of Zechariah “raises grave doubts about the ‘disappointment theory’ and about Carroll’s attempt to reformulate it in terms of cognitive dissonance theory. At least in this case, the emergence of utopian prophecies cannot be explained in terms of compensation for the disconfirmation of earlier prophecies.” Floyd is interested not only with ancient texts, but also with sociology of knowledge. He asks why is the “disappointment theory” so popular and so tenaciously supported given that there is no clear evidence supporting it, and substantial against it? Why does this view seem cogent to so many, for so long? According to Floyd, the answer rests on deep-seated habits of thinking about prophetic literature, and cultural conventions rooted in the *adversos Judaeos* tradition.

Although each of these chapters stands on its own, they all contribute to a multi-pronged approach to the matter of utopian and dystopian images in prophetic literature. Both theoretical aspects and close examination of texts found a place in this volume. Ideas expressed in one chapter bear substantial implications or stand in dialogue with positions advanced in another. The opening “speeches” given, the time for a

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<sup>8</sup> Assuming, of course, a Persian period or early Hellenistic setting for Zechariah 9–14.

<sup>9</sup> He focuses on Zech 1:7–6:15 and the relationship between Zechariah 1–8 and Zechariah 9–14.

thorough conversation just begins. This volume is just an invitation to commence a journey of examination of utopian and dystopian images in prophetic literature, against their ancient contexts.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> I would like to thank Dr. Katie Stott, presently a post-doc at the University of Alberta for her helpful comments to this introduction, and my MA student Tim Languille for his contribution to the editing of the manuscript.