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Utopia and Dystopia in Prophetic Literature

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Ehud Ben Zvi

**Utopias, Multiple Utopias, and
Why Utopias at All?
The Social Roles of Utopian Visions in
Prophetic Books within Their
Historical Context**

Introduction

Utopian images play a central role in the prophetic books. In fact, they are ubiquitous in them. This well known fact raises a number of very relevant historical questions. For instance, why would utopian images be so important for the communities of literati among whom and for whom these books were produced? What did it do and mean for these literati to think about and vicariously experience these utopian vignettes or mini-worlds? Since these vignettes were quite diverse in terms of imagery and, at least on the surface, in terms of their conceptual referents, another set of questions arise. For instance, why, instead of developing a basically unified image of the utopian future, did these literati 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 these images? Did the production of these multiple images follow some social grammar and constraints, and if so, what were these, how did they work and what do they tell us about the literati and their social and ideological world?

A productive discussion on these matters requires an obvious first step: Clarity in terminology. Utopia and utopian refer here to a discursive type of construct, which may manifest itself or be embedded in different literary genres—even if this chapter (and volume) deals only with prophetic books. Certainly, utopian images could and did appear in literary genres other than prophetic books even within the literary

repertoire and world of knowledge of ancient Israel (e.g., Genesis, Psalms¹).

The terms utopia and utopian, as used here, do not simply refer to constructions of circumstances that stand in time and/or space separate from, and are simply “better” than the present but to imagined circumstances whose main attributes is that they fulfill the horizon of the best imaginable state of affairs within a particular community or sets of communities and, as a result, are perceived by them as unrealizable within their usual course of events. In other words, rather than a better present, they offer a drastic break with that present and its constitutive circumstances, and by necessity point at perceived central lacks in society.

Understood in such a manner, utopian images are a social product. They arise within particular historical circumstances and reflect on them. This being so, they are an important source of information for historians. They shed much light on, and contribute to reconstructions of the intellectual and social history of those who were involved in the process of constructing and experiencing utopian images through reading and imagination. Needless to say, the multiformity that characterizes them contributes much to this historical reconstruction.

It is to be stressed that these utopian images were a social (or systemic), not a personal product. The matter discussed here is not one of personal fantasies. The act of reading authoritative prophetic books was a social and interpersonal endeavor. These utopian images were not private but shared by these literati. This sharing created a bond among the literate who shared not only the results of their imagination, but also, at least, in part, the very act of imagining, as they read, reread and meditated upon these utopian images and by doing so vicariously experienced the ideal future. Of course, this bonding and “proper” socializing carried also some regulatory functions as it reflected and construed a range of accepted thought and dream, even if multiplicity of utopian imagery was accepted.

¹ Concerning the latter, see, for instance, Ps 23:5-8, and as for the former, see the Garden of Eden story. Moreover, and to state the obvious, utopias are not restricted to ancient Israel and have appeared in myriads of places and in great varieties of genres. See, for instance, R. Schaer, G. Claeys, and L. T. Sargent (eds.), *Utopia: The Search for the Ideal Society in the Western World* (New York: New York Public Library and Oxford University Press, 2000).

Utopian images as such emerge in, and comment on particular circumstances including a perceived reality. As the cases discussed below show, these utopian images juxtaposed and contrasted that perceived and inferior reality with various portrayals of different utopian futures, all of which were perceived as infinitely superior not only to past dystopias, but to the present of the community. Despite their diversity, these images all point at wants in the perceived present as well as communicate a certainty that they will be overcome. They also point at a social need to develop some ideological discourse to deal with such social lacks (and wants) to partake in projects of shared imagination that involve circumstances in which these lacks are no more. These considerations further explain why the utopian images in the prophetic books shed substantial light on the intellectual and social worlds of the literati in ancient Yehud.

Utopian images provided those who read and entertained them with hope,² but “utopian image” or “utopian vision” is not simply another term of “message or image of hope.” Whereas hope may be a general need of human beings, and whereas the communication of hope played a central role in the reception of the prophetic books in ancient Israel and later, messages of hope certainly do not have to be utopian. Hope and promises of (implicit or explicit) promises of divine deliverance could and were often communicated without recourse to utopian discourse, if the latter is to mean more than a portrayal of a future that is simply better than the speaker’s present.

There is no categorical, non-contingent reason that would demand that prophetic books *as such* must include utopian images, or that the prophetic personages that populated the world of knowledge of the literati in ancient Israel had to be associated with such imagery. A few illustrations would suffice. The legends about Elijah and Elisha are not utopian. Many sections in prophetic books even those that include promises of divine help cannot be classified as utopian either (e.g., Isaiah 36–39). Further, a prophetic book may contain no utopian images (e.g., the book of Jonah—on the importance of this example see below).

² This is consistent with the fact that providing hope for the community was among the central roles of these books. Note the endings of these books and cf. the traditional evaluation of the twelve prophets in Sir 49:10.

In addition, prophetic books may and did convey much hope in clearly non-utopian ways. To illustrate: most prophetic books assume a readership for which reading about Israel's punishment in the past and its reasons is a way of acquiring knowledge about the divine and YHWH's wishes. Within these worldviews, YHWH's severe punishment of Israel in the past serves a continuous pedagogical purpose as an everlasting process relived as social memory that enriches, educates and warns Israel.³ Within discourses in which lack of proper knowledge, and certainly lack of knowledge of YHWH and YHWH's teachings was viewed as leading inexorably to a behavior that brings about YHWH's severe punishment (cf. Hos 4:6), the very existence of prophetic books along with a cadre of literati with the proper education to "decode" it, make feasible the acquisition of the mentioned knowledge and the ensuing appropriate socialization of ancient Israel. As such the very existence of prophetic (and other books) considered to be authoritative among the literati combined with the existence of a group of literati who mediate them to the community provide a significant level of hope, even if such hope can hardly be considered utopian. This is a hope that is based on "here and now" not on circumstances set apart from the present either temporally or spatially. This is a hope based on the present presence of authoritative books and of literati able to read them and communicate their messages.

In sum, the ubiquitous and most salient presence of utopian images in the messages of hope within prophetic literature along with their central roles in the shaping of the messages of these books as a whole represent paths taken in ancient Israelite society and among its literati. It was a contingent development, a systemic choice that calls for a historical explanation. For instance, a number of issues and questions come forcefully to the forefront. Among them, what did utopian images

³ Cf. R. Albertz, "Exile as Purification. Reconstructing the 'Book of Four'," in *Thematic Threads in the Book of the Twelve* (ed. P. L. Reddit and A. Scharf; BZAW 325; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2003, 232-51 (248). Some of the speeches reported in the book possibly carried a pedagogical purpose from the perspective of the generation that is under judgment within the world of the book (cf. Hos 5:15; 11:10-11; 14:2-4 which seem to indicate that this is YHWH's hope). But as the character YHWH, the implied author of the book and the actual primary readership know, these speeches failed to achieve the goal of properly educating and socializing monarchic Israel. The book, however, is supposed to carry a *successful* pedagogical function for its target readership.

and imagination involve or imply that made them so necessary in the communities of readers of prophetic books? Which social purposes and ideological roles did these utopian elements serve? Given that even cursory reading of the prophetic books shows a multiplicity of utopian visions among books and within the very same book, why would the very few literati who read and reread these books uphold and maintain such a multiplicity? What is at stake in the deployment of such multi-faceted discourse? What does it say about the intellectual matrix of the literati? What about issues of boundaries, such as which were the ideological and cultural borders surrounding and rules governing the production and acceptance of the multiple utopian visions within the societies within which the prophetic books were composed, read and reread?

On Utopian Images in Prophetic Books

A starting point to address these questions is that studies of utopias have indicated that utopian images not only convey hope, but communicate to, and socialize people into positions of estrangement and critique from reality.⁴ Utopia is precisely not what is but what should, and in the discourses of Yehud, mainly what will be.⁵ As the readers imagine and partake vicariously in these utopian worlds, they certainly felt and were supposed to feel estranged from their present situation. Moreover, the very portrayal of an imaginary ideal world carries a critique and ideological rejection of present conditions. These considerations hold true for the entire spectrum of utopian visions from texts such as Isa 11:1-10 or Jer 31:30-33, to Mic 4:1-5//Isa 2:2-5, and to “moderate” utopian images such as those communicated in the books of Obadiah

⁴ There is a large corpus of recent studies on Utopia and Utopianism. For a summary of common positions and the possible impact of utopian studies on Biblical studies, as well as extensive bibliographical references, see S. J. Schweitzer, *Reading Utopia in Chronicles* (PhD dissertation, University of Notre Dame, 2005), 29-64; and idem, “Utopia and Utopian Literary Theory: Some Preliminary Observations” in this volume.

⁵ There are, of course, some references to past utopias (e.g., Jer 30:30; Hos 2:17; 9:10; 11:1—on those in Hosea, see P. R. Davies’ chapter in this volume), but usually images of these utopian past are deployed directly or indirectly to construct and foster images of a future utopia. On the relation between past and future utopian imagery see below.

and Zephaniah.⁶ Moreover, given that the depictions of utopian circumstances tend to appear in short, poignant passages, they do not and cannot deal with all aspects of the new ideal world, these texts suggest a prioritization of perceived lacks and high desires (i.e., “wants” in the comprehensive sense of the term that covers both that which is considered to be lacking or at fault and that which is desired).

For instance, the text in Isa 11:1-10 asked its primary readers, among others, to focus on the character of the ideal Davidic king, the relation of the nations to him (and by implication to YHWH and Israel), and associated all of these with a fundamental change in the natural order that creates a most peaceful kingdom and is consistent with a world filled with knowledge of YHWH, while at the same time spatially draws attention to and enhances the status of the Jerusalemite temple. Mic 4:1-5 also deals with perceived faults in the present world of the community of readers concerning the role of the nations, their relation to YHWH, and Israel, and the status of Jerusalem and the temple. Jer 31:31-34 deals with the need for a change not in the natural order in general, but in the physical constitution of the Israelites so as to make them sin-proof, because YHWH’s teaching will not be taught to them but part of their natural makeup. In other words, it points at a utopian world in which social entropy ceases to exist and threaten proper order.⁷

Of course, none of these elements were present in the world of the Jerusalemite literati who read, reread and meditated upon these books. Human beings, including the readers of the books, were not sin-proof, the nations did not go up to Jerusalem to learn the word of YHWH, and the literati (or anyone else for that matter) certainly recognized that they were not living under the conditions portrayed in Isa 11:1-10. To be sure, at times, primary readers of prophetic books were asked to imagine utopias of at least seemingly less scope. But still when Persian

⁶ A comprehensive examination of each and every utopian image or variant of utopian image in prophetic literature is almost an encyclopedic task, well beyond the scope of this or any paper. This being so, only a few representative examples will be discussed and only as illustrations for the main points advanced in this paper.

⁷ Cf. E. Ben Zvi, “Analogical Thinking and Ancient Israel Intellectual History: The Case for an ‘Entropy Model’ in the Study of Israelite Thought,” in *Relating to the Text: Interdisciplinary and Form-Critical Insights on the Bible* (ed. T. J. Sandoval and C. Mandolfo; JSOTSup 384; London: T&T Clark International, 2003), 321-32.

period literati read and reread the book of Obadiah, they could not but notice that the conditions described in vv. 19-21 had not been realized in their days, and even if they wondered whether some aspects of the vision in Zeph 3:16-20 could have been partially fulfilled in their days, most likely never imagined their communities as fully realizing the description in Zeph 3:13.

Instead, these texts served to set standards to gauge their present situation, be it in relation to the borders of the polity or its sense of security or the ethical behavior of its members or the imagined features of a time in which YHWH will display the deity's kingship. In all these instances, as the intended and primary readers of these books interacted and vicariously experienced in their utopian worlds, they estranged themselves from and criticized their own perceived circumstances.⁸

It is worth stressing at this point that the very same books these literati read and reread as they engaged their utopian imagination were theirs and represented their viewpoints, but at the same time from their perspective, were YHWH's word. This discursive convergence of human and divine perspective explicitly resurfaces at different points. Some of the utopian images advanced in Hosea, for instance, are explicitly presented as utopian from the perspective of the literati and Israel as a whole, but also from YHWH's (see esp. 2:16-25; cf. 6:4-6; 11:8-11, and among other books, see, for instance, Isa 62:1-5). In some, the readers of these books are asked to imagine and vicariously partake not only in their utopian future, but YHWH's as well. This is, of course, not a necessity of utopian thought per se, but of such a thought and exercise in social imagination within the frame of the accepted discourses in ancient Yehud. In turn, this position strongly enhances the mentioned sense of estrangement from and critique of present circumstances. It is not only the readers' but YHWH's estrangement that these texts communicate.

This type of stance along with its related utopian images certainly connotes a strong sense of ideological defiance towards what the readerships of the prophetic books conceived to be their present status quo and towards those institutions perceived to uphold or embody it. It is also a triumphalist approach: The utopianist trend in these books defies

⁸ On the importance of the multiplicity of wants to be taken care of for understanding the multiplicity of utopian visions in prophetic books see below.

and negates the permanence of that perceived present status quo despite its seeming stability, for the status quo was construed as not being representative of YHWH's long-term will and certainly not of YHWH's desires and accordingly, as a state of affairs that will eventually vanish. Within these discourses the present must and will be replaced by a new world, namely the one the literati imagine through multiple sets of utopian images, and in which the perceived wrongs of the present status quo will be fully redressed.

The character or identity of the perceived main status quo that is so defied demands particular attention. The dominant ideologies/worldviews of the literati, the elite that supports them, and likely most of the population in Yehud are not challenged at all. Certainly there is no defiance of, for instance, central beliefs about the Jerusalemite temple or its role in the cosmic economy. There is no challenge of the association of the teaching of YHWH with the Jerusalem-centered literati and their authoritative books and certainly no challenge of theological viewpoints about the primacy of YHWH over the other gods, when or if the latter were even allowed to exist. There is no challenge of claims about an unique relation between YHWH and Israel. There is also no fundamental defiance of those who shape, support and communicate these ideological positions and their related worldviews. Of course, there is no fundamental defiance of the literati themselves, but also not of the institutions that supported them (mainly, the temple). All these texts reinforce central aspects of the ideological worldviews of the local, Jerusalem-centre elite. They are deployed in Yehudite discourses because their defiance is towards a world outside Yehud or potential inner challenges to the (dominant) ideological worldviews of the local elite.⁹ These are not utopian images in general, but above all utopian images of *otherness* vis à vis non-Yehudite, and ideologically "foreign" world. They reflected and were meant to reinforce a Yehudite (and from their perspective, Israelite) inner communal sense of belonging to a particular group with a singular relationship with YHWH, a particular (hi-)

⁹ Such as discursive trends that might have been developed out of an observation of the lowly worldly situation of Israel/Jerusalem and which from the perspective of the dominant viewpoints expressed in biblical literature would have been associated with a wavering of allegiances to the local tradition/truth.

story, unique obligations regarding YHWH and YHWH's teaching, and a glorious future.¹⁰

The mentioned defiance is to be anticipated, and perhaps even considered to be a kind of necessary response to the set of strong cognitive dissonances created by the contrast, between Yehudite claims and perceived reality. They claimed that their deity is the only one and that YHWH is the god of heaven and earth, but knew all too well that only a minuscule, and from a worldly perspective, lowly group in the entire world acknowledges or worships such a deity. They were fully aware that YHWH's power was not manifested in the world and that the only proper sanctuary of the creator of heaven and earth was a very minor one and certainly poor. They were fully cognizant of the minuscule size and importance of Jerusalem and Israel (in the worldly realm) as opposed to their unparalleled status and role in their ideological divine economy. YHWH was the king of the whole earth, but YHWH's empire was nowhere manifested on earth. Jerusalem remained a poor, minor, regional temple city in a dirt poor, peripheral province. The nations did not know YHWH, nor could have known about YHWH's power by looking at the story told by worldly institutions and structures. In that present, YHWH's kingship, Israel's role, Jerusalem's place and all the rest of the basic theological truths held by the Yehudites could exist *only in the minds* of the Yehudite intellectual elite and those who identified with its positions, *in Jerusalem's authoritative books, and lived through processes of reading, rereading, telling and retelling*. This cognitive dissonance per se is likely to shape utopian images. The likelihood of such a process developing increases to almost certainty as one takes into account that although the present conditions could be imagined to last for a lengthy undefined time, these theological discourses lead almost by necessity to a belief that at some point in the future the true divine economy will be deployed, and

¹⁰ This is consistent with the sociological role of the fact that the texts were written in Hebrew. The fact that YHWH's words (i.e., the prophetic books) were imagined as texts written only in Hebrew reflects and reinforces central ideological claims of the local center in Yehud and says about much about boundaries, otherness and local defiance. See E. Ben Zvi, "Beginning to Address the Question: Why Were Prophetic Books Produced and 'Consumed' in Ancient Yehud?" in *Historie og konstruktion: Festschrift til Niels Peter Lemche I anledning af 60 års fødselsdagen*. (ed. Mogens Müller and T. L. Thompson; Forum for Bibelsk Eksegese 14; Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum, 2005), 30-41.

YHWH's desires manifested in the world. Prophetic books communicated again and again reassurances that such is the case. A discourse in which these beliefs and reassurances figure prominently, is one that is bound to lead those who deploy it to acts of imagination about what manifestations of YHWH's desire in the world may look like, that is, to utopian images.

These considerations raise ways in which utopian images in the prophetic books are like but also unlike usual "utopias." In both cases, utopias describe, as they must, a world "nowhere" seen by relevant communities of readers and composers. The images in prophetic books, however, construe a world that was not and could not be imagined as really unattainable. To the contrary, prophetic texts must construe utopia as something certain to be attained. To be sure, the utopias evoked by prophetic books reflect deep communal yearnings in a very dreamy way, but they do so, within their original setting, to be considered *not* a (simple) dream, but an alternative and truer reality that will surely replace an everywhere manifested, well-known but fundamentally untrue reality, that is "the lie."¹¹ From the perspective of these communities, the ideal future has already been designed and decided by YHWH (cf. Isa 46:10). It is not by chance, that readings in prophetic books that summarize and construe Israel's trajectory through time, or sections thereof, that is their "history" as it were, may refer to both past and future (see, for instance, Hos 11:1-11;¹² Ezekiel 20:1-44; Mic 4:8-5:1, or the book of Zephaniah). It is precisely this mixing of past and future, both of which are known to YHWH and to the readers of the prophetic books that enhances the persuasive appeal of the utopian images which the ancient communities of readers of prophetic books are supposed to creatively and vicariously live through as they read and reread the book. Thus at some level, the utopian future already "exists." YHWH gracefully allowed Israel (and *only* Israel) *to know about it through the*

¹¹ To use a category in the Persian empire propaganda/ideology. See the Behistun Inscription.

¹² One may notice also that Hosea 11:1-11 reflects and shapes a discourse in which past and future seem fixed in a closely linked relationship that is expressed and communicated even at the level of word choice (cf. the case of the names mentioned above). See the use of verbal forms of הלך "go" in Hos 11:2 and 10, and references to Egypt in 11:1, 5, 10 (see also below), from the perspective of the larger perspective of Hos 4:1-11:11, cf. Hos 7:11 and 11:11 (and cf. also Hos 11:1-2).

reading of prophetic books, so it can already be known and experienced even if vicariously by the primary readers of these prophetic books and those to whom these literati read them. Moreover, through the process, the readers come to share even if in a very minor way an aspect of godliness, knowing the past and the future (cf. Isa 46:10)

Utopia as manifested in the imagination of the community of readers belongs to their present, but as a yet unattained utopia belongs not only to the future, but to an undefined future. There are neither timelines nor clear roads leading to its embodiment in the worldly world. Utopia is conceived as depending on YHWH, and on YHWH's timing. Significantly, the literati who read these books are not required by these visions to do anything beyond reading and dreaming about them and accordingly, to socialize Israel as the "other," that is, a group that holds particular religious worldviews and whose life is informed by them (i.e., acknowledges YHWH, and follows YHWH's teachings, and the like). Neither the literati nor their political leaders were asked by these texts to confront in military or political terms the powers of their time, and esp. the Persian empire. (It is also worth noting that although literati and priests are required to properly socialize Israel, utopia is often not imagined as dependent on their success.¹³)

These utopian threads are not a call for action in the present, but reflect and shape a strong ideological and discursive defiance, a sense of self-identity as "other," and a strong rhetorical affirmation of this otherness as understood by the regional center that is aimed at those understood by the center as insiders. At the same time, these threads are fully consistent with political accommodation with the imperial powers of the time. In fact, it is likely that paradoxically, their ideological position of defiance within the inner discourse of the community allowed them to set the ground for a stable accommodation that does not negate a self-understanding of the community as Israel, and as

¹³ Some/many of the utopian visions do not go so far as to condition the future reconciliation of Israel and YHWH, and the new world that follows it, on the success of the literati's socialization of Israel. In fact, the idea that Israel requires special new endowments (e.g., Jer 31:31-34; Hos 2:21-22) so as not to deviate from YHWH's paths suggests a perception that a fully and stable socialization of Israel is beyond the capabilities of the literati. Similarly, these texts suggest that the reconciliation between YHWH and Israel is not dependent on the latter's repentance. On these matters, cf. E. Ben Zvi, "Analogical Thinking and Ancient Israel Intellectual History," 321-32.

such bound to YHWH and YHWH's teachings. Utopian thoughts in these groups served as a successful mode to cope with reality that negated neither the truths held by central internal discourses and their associated self-identity nor disallowed practical accommodations. Utopian thoughts and images at some levels strongly and successfully confronted the status quo, but as they did so they contributed to its preservation as well.

Of Multiple Utopian Images, Limits to Multiplicity, Social Context and Grammar

Introduction

As mentioned above, one of the main characteristics of the utopian visions in prophetic books is their multiplicity. This is not only a literary feature of the books, but a substantial datum for understanding the role of these utopias in society and for an historical understanding of the intellectual and ideological world of the literati. Why would a very limited number of literati in Persian Yehud¹⁴ be asked to read about, imagine, and vicariously partake in the bliss of *multiple* utopian visions, which may be seen at least on the surface as contradictory? Was such a multiplicity a required feature without which the utopian visions would have failed to serve the roles discussed above? If so, why? What does this multiplicity of visions tell us about the intellectual (and social) world of the literati?

¹⁴ The total population of Persian Yehud was low to begin with and the percentage of highly literate people in that society was also very low. For estimates of Yehud's and Jerusalem's populations at the time see recently O. Lipschits, "Demographic Changes in Judah between the Seventh and the Fifth Centuries BCE," in *Judah and the Judeans in the Neo-Babylonian Period* (ed. O. Lipschits and J. Blenkinsopp; Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2003, 323-76 and the bibliography cited there. On the low number of literati and related matters, see E. Ben Zvi, "Introduction: Writings, Speeches, and the Prophetic Books—Setting an Agenda," in *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, 1-29 and the bibliography cited there.

Charting Multiplicity of Utopian Images in Prophetic Books and their Limits

To be sure, within the discourse of the early Second Temple there was clear multiplicity of images about the ideal future. This multiplicity, however, needs to be chartered, and certainly never meant unlimited options. The range of possible utopian images was restricted, among others, by three fundamental, related factors: (a) the basic roles of utopian images in society, and (b) the particular sets of fundamental lacks agreed to be central to the community and particularly connective lacks, and (c) the sets of potential ways that these lacks could be redressed.

Turning to the first of these three factors, utopian images as demonstrated above served to support the center that created them, and its basic ideology. Given the basic social function of these images in terms of shaping and communicating a sense of local, ideological defiance and self identity, it is obvious that the creation and development of socially and ideologically viable utopias in these circumstances involved clear constraints sets by the boundaries between that which was considered ideologically acceptable and what was not from the perspective of the center that these utopian visions served to support. Since utopian images in the prophetic books served to a large extent to develop discourses in which not only “the other” is constructed but is also ideologically diminished in status or subordinated to the center, there was no room for any utopian vision in which, for instance, Israel will worship Marduk at Babylon, or for that matter and much more to the point, YHWH at Mt. Gerizim or Beth-El. (Note the quite constant polemic against Bethel and other Benjaminite sites and against northern Israelites/Samaritans in much of the books that eventually became included in the latter and former prophets.)

The second factor involved a system of constraints associated with another aspect of the self-understanding and shared worldview of the intellectual elites who produced, read and reread the authoritative books that eventually were included in the Hebrew Bible. Within these elites, multiple constructions of the past and present could easily co-exist. Whereas constructions of the past were constrained by the “core

facts” agreed upon by the community at any given time,¹⁵ constructions of the utopian future seem to have been controlled by an implied list of the most fundamental, perceived lacks and the need to redress them through utopian visions felt in these circles. Of course, not all lacks are equal. The more fundamental and more likely to be included in the list are “connective lacks,” that is, lacks that were understood as connecting many other discrete lacks. Among the most important, perceived, central, connective lacks within the world of these literati as reflected in prophetic (and other) literature one may mention: (1) Israel’s worldly weakness, (2) Jerusalem’s/Zion’s worldly weakness, (3) lack of acknowledgment of YHWH (and YHWH’s kingship) among the nations, and (4) the threatening existence of what we may call “social entropy” (see above). All of these lacks connect to and “generate” discourses about numerous discrete lacks.

Of course these set of lacks raised a system of possible solutions that within the discourses of these literati was far from monolithic but also governed by ideological and social constraints, as well as by their basic role, namely to redress sets of particular lacks. Moreover, again connective solutions were preferred. These considerations led to utopian images of the future in which some of the following motifs play a central role: (a) (increased) progeny, (b) (control and particularly stable control over) the land, (c) drastic change in the relative status of the nations other than Israel vis-à-vis Israel; (d) transformation of humanity/world/Israel to tackle the problem of social entropy; and (e) manifestation and human acknowledgment of YHWH’s kingship over world/Israel.

Of course, these motifs may combine and recombine in different ways in utopian visions (e.g., promises and visions of multiple progeny may appear together with promises and visions of possession of the land) resulting in multiple discrete images. Multiplicity, within certain boundaries however, results also from the various images that these motifs may and did evoke within the discourses of the literati who wrote and read the prophetic books (in their present form). For in-

¹⁵ See for instance, E. Ben Zvi, “Malleability and its Limits: Sennacherib’s Campaign against Judah as a Case Study,” in *“Like a Bird in a Cage”: The Invasion of Sennacherib in 701 BCE* (ed. L. L. Grabbe; JSOTSup 363; European Seminar in Historical Methodology 4; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press/Continuum, 2003), 73-105.

stance, the extent of the land could and was envisioned in different ways; the explicit display of YHWH's kingship on earth could be imagined as including images of a messianic king in Judah/Jerusalem/Zion or clearly without them; the change of the status of the nations other than Israel vis à vis Israel could be envisioned as a result of YHWH's judgment/punishment against the former, or as due to their acknowledgment of the kingship of YHWH and their desire to learn YHWH's word and instruction from the Jerusalemite elite. Temporal relations also played a role. To be sure, the utopian visions are all in the future, but how does this future relate to the past, and to which discrete past.¹⁶ As a result a kind of discursive or ideational grammar of utopian imagination developed. Within this grammar, sets of potential substitutions, accretions, deletions and the like developed.

These considerations allow us to begin to chart, even if at the level of rough strokes only, multiplicity in utopian images in prophetic literature. To be sure a full study of these matters is beyond the scope of this (or any) essay, but the following discussion suffices to illustrate the general contours of what such endeavors into charting multiplicity along its meandering paths and constrains might achieve. In the following, and for illustrative purposes only, I will focus on the book of Hosea and set its utopian visions within the context of other visions found in Hosea itself and in other prophetic books that were also read and re-read in early Second Temple period and shared the same or a very similar basic "sea of ideas."¹⁷

¹⁶ I discussed elsewhere the discursive marginalization of the present and the related self-effacing character of the literati, and on the correlated strengthening of their claims about their own importance in society as brokers of divine knowledge. See, for instance, E. Ben Zvi, "What is New in Yehud? Some Considerations," in *Yahwism after the Exile* (ed. Rainer Albertz and Bob Becking; STAR, 5; Assen: Van Gorcum, 2003), 32-48.

¹⁷ The choice of Hosea, however, is not completely arbitrary, nor is it dependent in the main on my own interest in the book. The intended and primary readers of the book of Hosea could not miss that most of the textual space in the book of Hosea consists of horrifying imagery, references to Israel's punishment, violence and destruction, sin in the land and exile from the land. The book seems to overflow with condemnation for monarchic Israel. Yet even this book is about hope and utopia. In fact, the latter looms much larger against the background of apparent hopelessness (cf. Sir 49:10 and later use of portions of Hosea in Jewish liturgy). Hosea is among the most salient books in the Hebrew Bible when it comes to communicating an absolute certainty that utopia will become reality in the future.

Turning to some of the relevant texts, Hos 2:1-3 asked its intended and primary readers to imagine a future in which “they” (i.e., Israel) will be numerous as the sand of the sea, and reconciled with YHWH. The utopian character of the description about multiple progeny was phrased so as to evoke the memory of the/a divine promise to the patriarchs concerning the multiplication of their “seed” (Gen 22:17; 32:13). Thus the text raised the theme of a new beginning—which is elaborated from another perspective in the following reading in the book 2:3-25—and by doing so blurred, in part, the difference between past and future, and between the (hi)story of Israel agreed upon among the readers and writers of the book and their narratives about the future of Israel. This element which was implicit in the utopian imagery of 2:1-3 was, of course, explicitly raised in 2:16-25 (see also Hos 11:1, 10-11). It appeared also in other prophetic books (e.g., Ezek 36:10-11). For the present purposes, it is worth stressing that utopian images were in these cases temporally anchored in both the past and future (unlike some present-day utopian imagery). Of course, these discursive strategies never completely negated the obvious differences between past and future circumstances (e.g., people in a second return/rekindled relationship between the deity and Israel were imagined as necessarily aware of the first and its failure in a way that those in the first were rarely imagined).

At the same time, vast portions of the past, and at times almost the entire past (e.g., Hos 9:10; 10:1, 9; 11:1; cf. Ezek 20) were imagined as an unacceptable partner in utopia, since they were understood at the very least, as including the seeds of disobedience, judgment and destruction and at worst imagined as a full blown dystopia. In fact, utopian visions in these cases were not supposed to blur distinctions between past and future, but to discursively obliterate the latter, even if by doing, it creates an imaginary list of issues to be addressed and redressed by utopian visions.

The variety found among utopian images in prophetic literature concerning the past reflects the basic ambivalence about it in these discourses. On the one the hand, images of the past were associated with dystopia but on the other with pre-figurations of the future utopia. Significantly, in Hos 2:1-3 there was even more than a pre-figuration. The seeds of reconciliation with YHWH and the idyllic future were presented to the readers as already existing and embedded in the dire de-

scription of the punishment, from YHWH's perspective and, therefore, indirectly from the readership's perspective. This was most obvious in the case of the names: "She-is-not-pitied" and "Not-my people." Both clearly developed within the primary and intended readerships an anticipation of reversal. Conceptually similar, the conclusion of the body of the book (and of the third reading), namely Hos 14:2-9, reversed images of destruction, punishment and death and transformed them into messages of hope. As such it provided a crucial interpretative clue for the understanding of all the previous messages of judgment communicated to the rereaders of the book: Judgment does not endure for ever; rather than bringing death, it carries in itself, through its imagery and very wording the seed of a new, ideal future.

Thus, utopia was not only related to a past dystopia, but was constructed as existing in an embryonic way in the latter. Within the general perspective of the book of Hosea, the matter was reinforced by the setting of the divine announcements concerning the utopian future of Israel within the world of the book: YHWH proclaims the sure-to-be utopia and by doing so makes it "real" in the midst of one of the most dystopian periods of monarchic Israel. From the perspective of the intended and primary readers of the book of Hosea, the seeds of utopia were planted already in, and emerge out of dystopia.

This nuanced conceptual temporal blurring contributes to and emerges out of theological worldviews according to which from YHWH's perspective past and future are not separated by an unbridgeable gap (see, for instance, Isa 46:10). As mentioned above, both past and future were imagined as known to the deity and certain. Those who identified themselves with YHWH's viewpoint as portrayed in prophetic books were supposed to share that understanding, be reassured and even elevated by their own "true knowledge" of both past and present. In sum, these multiple temporal considerations in utopian visions served social and didactic functions.

Turning from temporal to spatial features in utopian images and their possible functions, whereas utopia usually conveys both a sense of "good place" and "no place," the utopian images present in prophetic books were construed for the most part in terms of a narrow set of related spaces (the land, Judah or Jerusalem). Even when crucial utopian events are imagined to take place outside the land (e.g., Hos 2:16; Ezek 37:1), the particular space of the land and the theme of a return to the

land were omnipresent. Multiplicity occurred mainly at the level of how the land was envisioned.

For instance, the attention of the intended and primary readers of the book of Hosea was drawn to a land that comprises Judah and Israel, as they read 2:1-3, and which was imagined in terms of its agricultural fertility, and its corresponding association with YHWH as they read 2:16-25. Other dimensions of the land that involved purity and the ability to worship properly the deity in what was referred to as “YHWH’s land” came to the forefront in Hos 10:3-4. Amos 9:13-15 was probably the most famous text in which the themes of a return to the land and agrarian bounty were deeply intertwined. Other prophetic texts tended to emphasize utopian visions that brought to the forefront images of return and a set of highly elevated motifs around the spatial construct of Zion/Jerusalem/Temple. Notwithstanding all their differences, texts such as Isa 54:11-17; Ezek 40–48, Mic 4:1-5; Obadiah and Zeph 3 provide good examples of these visions. In these cases, the phenomenon of multiple visions in prophetic books reflects an intellectual milieu that is strongly shaped by both (a) a motif of exile from, and future full return to a land conceived as unique in YHWH’s economy and deeply involved in the relationship between YHWH and Israel, and (b) claims about the theological status of Jerusalem and its temple and a perceived rhetorical necessity to defend such status, likely against claims and discourses of other Yhwistic centers. Since prophetic books were meant to socialize the literati and through them Yehud around the theological positions supported by the Jerusalemite center, then it is only anticipated that its core concerns will be reflected in the utopian images that these books evoke in their intended and primary readerships.

The text of Hos 2:1-3 raised the theme of a future return to the land but also associated it with the re-unification of Israel and Judah, and with the image of a Davidic/Mosaic ruler over them (Hos 2:2), and within the larger context of Hos 1:2–2:25, also with that of a future, eternal and peaceful covenant. The presence of similar clusters of themes elsewhere in prophetic literature (see Ezek. 34:23-29, 37:11-28; though the leader is elsewhere clearly a Davide, see below) suggests a certain discursive/ideational grammar of utopian visions in which visions were created on the basis of clusters of themes that allow for a relatively limited number of potential substitutions or additions. For instance, utopian images of Israel’s strength vis à vis its enemies may ap-

pear instead or side by side with those of eternal peace (see, for instance, Isa 11:1-16).

Given that the motif of the leader appeared in Hos 2:1-3 and there evoked Mosaic/Davidic imagery, it is not surprising that the theme is taken again and in a very salient manner in Hos 3. The intended and primary readers of this text were asked to imagine not only a period in the past in which Israel was without king, officers, sacrifices and priests—that is, without monarchy and without temple—but also a future Israel that will seek and tremble towards YHWH and have quasi-messianic Davide as king. The particular choice of words in Hos 3:5 is noteworthy. Although “to seek (Heb. *שָׁקַט*) YHWH/God” was common in prophetic literature, “to seek YHWH and David” was very unusual. Within the authoritative discourses of ancient Israel, people were supposed to seek the deity, not human beings. A text that states explicitly Israel is to seek “X” cannot but characterize X as something more than a human being essentially similar to all those who populate the earth (cf. Isa 11—and notice the expression in 11:10; cf. Mal 3:1). In sum, the text connoted that the future David, the king of the children of Israel (meaning here trans-temporal Israel) is not another king to reign on earth, but an elevated figure, a messianic figure. The inclusion of messianic images of a future Davide in utopian visions is attested in other prophetic books (e.g., Isa 11:1-10; Mic 5:1-5), but significantly, the intended and primary readers of Hos 3 were asked to read the entire book, not a single portion of it and disregard the rest. This being so, they could not but notice the salient position of the metaphor of the tree at the conclusion of the body of the book of Hosea in 14:5-9. The image of a majestic tree standing above everything else was a relatively common royal metaphor, and the associated metaphor of living under the shade of a majestic tree conveyed an image of a kingly protector. Thus the body of the book of Hosea concluded with an image that reflected and communicated a vision of future, ideal Israel/Ephraim living in prosperity and peace under the protection and kingship of YHWH (compare and contrast with Lam 4:20). Significantly, similar ideological horizons were reflected and communicated towards, or at the conclusion of other prophetic books (see Obad 21; Zeph 3:15, Zech 14:9). In none of these instances the readers were asked to envision a messianic Davide as part of this utopian vision. In fact, a messianic, kingly character appears nowhere in Zephaniah. In Obadiah the text ac-

tually precluded such an option and evoked instead, by connotation, images associated in the discourses of the time with the period of the Judges. Although the image of YHWH as king/tree in Hos 14:5-9 did not necessarily or logically preclude that of a messianic Davidic king, the absence of a reference to the Davide at this stage in the book is not without significance, and particularly so given the endings of prophetic books (e.g., Obadiah, Zeph 3:14-10, and noteworthy for the obvious contrast, Amos 9:11). Moreover, in the case of Hos 14:5-9, the weight of the absence of a reference was substantially reinforced by the presence of another. The second character in the quasi-paradisiacal world portrayed in Hos 14:5-9 was Israel/Ephraim. The latter was also metaphorically compared to a tree (verses 6-7), and kingly attributes were explicitly associated with it. (See in particular הודו “its [Israel’s] majesty” and cf. Jer 22:18; Ps 45:4. Significantly, הוד is an attribute that can be associated also with the deity [e.g., Hab 3:3; Job 37:22]). The conclusion of the book shaped an ideological image of not only a future world in which YHWH will be the King, but also of one in which Israel will be kingly and bear some divine attributes. From a different perspective, but still within the very same book of Hosea, Israel was portrayed as becoming king-like when it was imagined as receiving from YHWH some godly/kingly attributes such as righteousness, justice, kindness and mercy (Hos 2:21). Constructions of Israel as fulfilling kingly roles appeared elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible. The most obvious of them concerns the ubiquitous concept of a covenant between YHWH and Israel, rather than between YHWH and king. It is worth noting that conversely images often associated with Israel as people were associated in some utopian visions with kingly figures (see Jer 33:22; and notice there the reference to the Levites as well). Although conceptually different, YHWH and the future Davide, as ideal kings of Israel, filled some structurally similar slots within “grammars” of utopian thought. At times, Israel, if kingly attributes were associated with it, could fill at least some of these kingly roles in utopian images.

Kingly/messianic and non-kingly/messianic, YHWH focused utopias appeared in prophetic books, at times within the same prophetic book. There is no denial that there is a substantial ideological difference in the messages conveyed by these utopias, but also that there was a certain implied grammar of substitution at work.

Moreover, the undeniably substantial difference in the messages of these utopias does not detract from the shared core and social role that these seemingly contradictory images fulfilled. Both pointed at a perceived lack and yearning that was prominent at least within the intellectual elite of Persian Yehud. The images of a splendid future with YHWH as King (with no reference to, or precluding a reference to a Davide) and of a messianic (or quasi-messianic) Davide as king served both as discursive responses to the lack of glorious leadership in the present of the community of readers, and the effects of this lack both in terms of the perceived status of Israel and its behavior. These utopian images redressed the situation, within ideologically accepted parameters in the discourses of the community. Although different, both visions served well for their social (and ideological) purpose, and therefore they were developed and deployed. Moreover, although these versions may seem from some perspectives as at least in tension, there is no substantial reason to assume that they were considered mutually exclusive among the literati of ancient Israel. Certainly they were not considered so, nor could have been considered so by the intended and primary readers of the book of Hosea as a whole, if as expected, they took seriously all the didactic prophetic readings in the book.¹⁸ In fact, within communities that were certainly not about to fulfill either type of utopia but instead dreamt about compensation of wants in an utopian future as part of a process of maintaining their self identity and sense of otherness, these visions were unlikely to be thought of as incompatible. Those in the Persian period who yearned for the materialization of the glorious kingdom of YHWH, would not necessarily oppose the idea of a messianic future and vice versa.

Another common topos in utopian images of the future in prophetic literature that has relevance to the present discussion concerns the perceived lack of relative earthly status of Israel vis-à-vis the other nations, which stands in sharp contrast with the status in the ideological worlds of Jerusalem-centered Yehud as exemplified in its prophetic books. Of course, Yehudite Israel could do and did nothing in the earthly world on the matter. But literati could still dream about them as they read and reread prophetic books. Others in ancient Yehud could

¹⁸ Within this intellectual milieu, compromises that keep both and the tension between them easily emerge (cf. 1 Chr 17:14).

join them when these literati read and interpreted these texts to them. In fact, given the numerous utopian visions deployed in prophetic books that compensate for this perceived lack—and its possible implications for constructions of self-identity and otherness—it seems that it played a central place in the imagination of the local center of power and its literati. On the surface, these utopian images were extremely diverse. For instance, within the imagination of the relevant literati and those associated with them, the relative status of the nations other than Israel vis-à-vis the latter could be envisioned as changing because the former would be punished with defeat and suffer disaster at the hands of YHWH (see the so-called “oracles against the nations”). Even in this case, a certain level of multiple visions develops. The nations may, for instance, suffer punishment so as to recognize YHWH’s rulership over the world (and the associated high status of Israel and Jerusalem—see, for instance, the explicit references in Ezek 25:11, 17; 26:6; 28:22-23; 29:9), or after severe punishment and exile be gathered back by YHWH and returned to their land at an utopian time (e.g., Jer 48:44-47; 49:5-6; 49:39), or the text may draw the attention of the readers to their divinely caused fall, whether much textual space is devoted to it (e.g., Jer 50:1-51:64) or not (e.g., Am 1:9). But the literati and those associated with them could and did imagine scenarios in which the nations willingly acknowledge YHWH (and Zion and Israel’s status) in the future and accordingly, march to Jerusalem to learn YHWH’s torah (Isa 2:2-4; Mic 4:1-5). They could and did imagine the nations other than Israel as bringing gifts to the Temple (e.g., Hag 2:6-9), or as bringing Israel back to Jerusalem and the Temple and serving there (Isa 66:18-21), rather than coming to Jerusalem to attack it (ct. Zech 14:2). Similarly, within these utopian visions the low status of the “remnant of Israel” among the other nations may be transformed through acts of imagination in which the Israelites become like dew, which brings blessing to those surrounding it, or a terrifying lion that tramples and devours. Significantly, both images in this case appear side by side, informing each other in Mic 5:6, 7-8. The nations may be constructed as symbolically opposed Zion/Israel (see, for instance, the opposition between Mt. Zion and Mt. Esau in Obad 21) or as converging towards it (Isa 66:18-21). These variants point at discursive grammars that allowed certain acts of theme substitution. Of course, such a grammar

explains the how, not necessarily the why of multiple and at times seemingly at tension utopian images (see below).

The deployment of multiple utopian images concerning the fate of the nations other than Israel reflects and points at the existence of a web of images within the discourse of Yehud that informed and balanced each other (see below). It bears particular note that these images did not purport to present a plan of action for the Yehudite elite or anyone in Yehud for that matter. Utopia was not about to be turned into reality by their actions. They could only indulge in dreams about it, but by doing so they constructed, developed and deployed compensators for their perceived lacks. These images were in fact not really about the nations other than Israel, but mainly about matters of self-identity of the intellectual elite of Yehud as Israel, of ideological boundaries. This being so, it is not surprising that despite all their differences, these utopian images communicated also a strong sense of convergence. For instance, utopia can exist when the status/glory of Zion, Temple, Jerusalem and Israel in either absolute or relative terms is strongly enhanced. If and when the nations other than Israel were imagined as partially Israelitized, that is, as accepting elements of the worldviews and behaviors associated with Israel, such an imagery was construed as utopian. When the converse was depicted, that is, when Israel was associated with worldviews and behaviors associated with nations other than Israel, such imagery was considered dystopian. None of these is surprising, since these were utopian visions of (discursive) otherness, aimed at maintaining it and the self-identities they shaped.

Multiplicity: Reasons and Functions

The first observation concerns a negative: the multiplicity of utopian images in prophetic books cannot be explained in terms of separate, unconnected self-sustaining socio-cultural groups, each holding to its own separate discourse and books.¹⁹ The grammars and the underlying perceptions of lack keep these images together. Moreover, the intended and primary readerships of the prophetic books found in a substantial

¹⁹ Observation about the social realia of ancient Yehud also make the possibility of separate, unconnected self-sustaining socio-cultural groups very improbable. See above.

number of cases these seemingly at tension visions in the same book (cf. Mic 4:1-5 and 7:17), and at times one in the textual vicinity of the other (e.g., Mic 5:6, 7-8.). The intended and primary readers were asked to approach each of these visions in a way informed by the other and the multiple viewpoints they convey (see below).

Turning to positive observations, a number of factors contributed to the strong preference of multiple (rather than single) utopian visions in prophetic books,²⁰ and in the discourses of the period as a whole. These factors include literary constrains, the didactic/rhetorical goal of the utopian visions, the preference for texts that allowed a continuous process of shared imagination guided by and associated with reading and rereading prophetic (and other authoritative) books and the related preference for texts that were “usable” and transmittable horizontally and vertically, and social preference of integrative discourses.

To begin with, depictions of utopian circumstances tend to appear in prophetic books in short, poignant passages, and as such they do not and cannot deal with all aspects of the perceived wants that within the discourses of ancient Yehud need to be addressed in the ideal future. Although each account draws attention to some issues and wants, none could reflect the full breadth of them as it existed in the intellectual discourses of the period. Prophetic books addressed these matters, as they did in numerous other central theological issues, by evoking in the primary and intended readerships multiple messages and visions that informed each other, and which all together reflected the theologically more integrative and sophisticated position that the readership of the book was supposed to associate with its implied author. Multiplicity is in this sense a rhetorical, literary strategy that reflects an intellectual setting shaped as a whole by a stance of “both—and” instead of “either—or,” of course, within clear parameters agreed upon within the group (see below).

Moreover, even if all these utopian vignettes inform each other, they still had a particular *Sitz im Buch* and tended to be textually and conceptually linked by numerous bonds to their immediate textual context in the book. As a result, some level of additional multiplicity among these visions is to be expected.

²⁰ Read as the self-contained literary units that they present themselves to their target readerships, or as commonly referred, read “as a unit.”

As demonstrated above, seemingly conflicting utopian images (e.g., kingly/messianic and non-kingly/messianic) could and were deployed in prophetic books and at times in the very same prophetic book provided that they served well their didactic and ideological functions. The fact that the mentioned utopian images served rhetorical and didactic functions, and did not involve a call to action to implement them, contributed much to the ability of books to carry all of them. These considerations do not explain, however, why multiple utopian visions were produced to begin with. This social phenomenon is linked in part to the fact that multivalent texts are better suited to continuous reading and rereading than plain unambiguous texts. A network of multiple images informing each other allows much better than a single vision for a continuous process through time of developing a constant sharing of imagining and imagination among the literati that is anchored in literary utopian visions present in prophetic books. Multivalent sets of utopian visions allow for and facilitate different readings of and emphases on the shared text both through time (i.e., “vertically”) and at the same time through different circumstances, social settings or even individual, contingent positions, after all, even the same people may say and think different things under different circumstances, or be expected to say, think and hear different things (i.e., follow different scripts) under different circumstances.²¹ In addition, it is likely that even in a small group that was socialized together like the Jerusalemite literati responsible for the production, reading and rereading of prophetic literature different personal positions did exist.²² It is against this background that an additional, substantial consideration about the reasons and functions of the multiplicity of utopian visions arises: Lack of logical cohesion within authoritative texts allows for and serves to develop social cohesion in textual-centered groups (that is in communities at whose center, at least according to their own understanding, stood written books),²³

²¹ Cf. the characterization of the Greek gods in oratory and tragedy. See C. Pelling, *Literary Texts and the Greek Historian* (London/New York: Routledge, 2000) 2-5.

²² Note the characters and implied authors of the books that were later included in the Hebrew Bible bear different voices and ideas. Some degree of similarity between the implied and actual authorship of these texts is to be anticipated.

²³ An analysis of the general implications of these considerations for the study of prophetic literature goes beyond the scope of this chapter. In fact, it requires a separate study, which I plan to carry out at a later time.

because the different and seemingly contradictory visions are all integrated within the very same authoritative literary repertoire read and reread by the same group of literati, and at times even in the same book. Textual integration reflects and shapes social integration and vice versa. Tendencies towards integrative discourses in which seemingly contradictory visions rather than opposing each other are brought to bear and inform each other along with its consequences in terms of social cohesion are actually expected in Yehud, given the very small number of literati that existed at any time in early Second Temple period, and given ideological and discursive needs for social cohesion, continuity and textual centeredness.²⁴

What Can be Learned from the Existence of Such a Multiplicity

Obviously, such a multiplicity is proof positive that multiple constructions of ideal futures could co-exist within the literati's world(s) in Persian Yehud. The implications of this observation are less obvious. Within these worlds, both multiple constructions of the past and the future co-existed. This feature implies that these literati neither were constrained nor read the authoritative books in their repertoire with an expectation for full, simplistic mimesis,²⁵ whether in references to the past or the future. Within their discourses, constructions of the past and the future were deployed primarily to serve explicit didactic purposes, and understood as such.²⁶

Another seemingly simple observation: Multiple utopias in prophetic books did not lead to, and cannot be associated within Persian Yehud to permanent social fragmentation and the associated development of textually-centered sectarian discourses (see above). Of course, the small number of literati at any time in Persian Yehud did not allow for the creation of separate, unconnected self-sustaining socio-cultural

²⁴ To be sure, the tapestry of these seemingly contradictory texts also serves as well for historians, since only this tapestry approximates what might be construed as the encompassing system of ideas, imagination and visions that may be associated with the literati as a collective, or social group.

²⁵ Cf. E. Ben Zvi, *History, Literature and Theology in the Book of Chronicles* (London: Equinox, forthcoming 2006), chapter 3.

²⁶ Of course, indirectly they served social purposes as well. See above.

groups, with their own separate discourse. Still the contrast between early and late Second Temple period is illustrative, and by implication sheds light on the social and intellectual world of the literati of Persian Yehud, as well as on their interrelatedness.

For instance, among the many factors that contributed to the difference between early and late Second Temple period, one may mention social and economic developments in the latter that led to a larger population, increased urbanization and literacy²⁷ and in a decrease in the extent to which ideological constructions could be controlled by the center.²⁸ As important is the level of social tensions within Late Second Temple period and in particular the associated hot “eschatological temperature” of the period,²⁹ which stands in sharp contrast with that of the early Persian period. One may note that in the former utopian images allowed readers to dream about a future in their present, and to accommodate to the political and social circumstances of that present rather than overturn them. Even when concrete, detailed depictions are provided (Ezek 40–48), they are not presented as a blueprint that the readers of the book are expected to bring to fulfillment in their days. In these social and ideological circumstances, seeming or potential incongruence among visions of the future are far less likely to lead to permanent social fragmentation than when the eschatological temperature is hot and the new world is “at hand.”

This is not to deny, of course, that the utopian visions of the prophetic books likely functioned as latent discursive “viruses,” which although dormant under regular circumstances (e.g., during the early Second Temple period), were likely to become very active under others, for instances at times of “messianic or eschatological fervor.” The use of some of these utopian texts in the Late Second Temple demonstrates that such was the case.

The multiplicity of utopian vision in prophetic books attests to, and is at least in part due to the strong integrative processes that characterized the discourse and literary output of the Jerusalemite literati, and

²⁷ In terms of total numbers proficient readers, and possibly as percentage of the total population as well

²⁸ On these matters, see A. Baumgarten, *The Flourishing of Jewish Sects in the Maccabean Era: An Interpretation* (Leiden, Brill, 1997), esp. pp. 114–51.

²⁹ Cf. A. Baumgarten, “‘But Touch the Law and the Sect Will Split’: Legal Dispute as the Cause of Sectarian Schism,” *Review of Rabbinic Judaism* 5 (2002), 301–15.

which reinforced social cohesion, and self-identity. It is already noteworthy that for these readers the implied authors of prophetic books spoke with multiple voices, but even more worth of attention was that they characterized the personage YHWH in their books and the deity itself—as they understood it—as holding and communicating multiple visions (most of the utopian visions are explicitly assigned to YHWH), which accordingly, could not have been conceived as opposing each other, but as relating and informing each other, and above all, as part of a divine, personal unity.³⁰ In other words, the very same discursive and integrative processes referred above were conceived as reflecting and shedding light on the character of YHWH. Given that within the worldviews and discourses of the literati in Jerusalem, pious people were supposed to identify with the deity, and that it was certainly laudable to imitate it within that which is possible, it is possible and even likely that they thought that a personality that embodies this type of integrative discourse is to be praised and serves as a goal to which Jerusalemite literati should aspire as much as possible.³¹

Conclusions

Utopian visions were ubiquitous in prophetic literature because they fulfilled well important social roles. They conveyed a sense of hope, but also of estrangement from the present. They addressed central cognitive dissonances, and served to express and reinforce a sense of ideological defiance that touched the core of the Jerusalemite center self-perception, supported its claims vis à vis Yehudites in general, and perhaps other Yhwistic groups, while at the same time facilitated a practical accommodation with the status quo.

³⁰ It is extremely unlikely that they conceived YHWH as having multiple, separate personalities. A study of the implications of these characterizations for the study of prophetic literature in its ancient context is beyond the scope of this chapter. I plan to discuss the matter in a separate contribution, within the frame of a study on the social and intellectual setting of the production of prophetic books.

³¹ This observation bears serious potential implications for understanding the processes of writing and reading prophetic (and other) books in Persian Yehud. The matter is beyond the scope of this paper. I plan to address it in the near future in a monograph.

The observed multiplicity of utopian visions reflects both a web of images that existed in ancient Yehud and a sense of “both—and” created by the way in which these images informed rather than excluded each other within the discourses of the literati. Instances of lack of seemingly logical cohesion in the prophetic books serves to enhance social cohesion and reflect and contribute to a systemic process of preferring and developing integrative discourses in ancient Yehud. Moreover, they reflect their image of YHWH, and possibly or even likely of what a good literati should aim at becoming, namely a person who embodies an integrative discourse in which multiple voices are brought together, rather than opposing and canceling each other.

The wide variety of constructions of the future in utopian visions in prophetic literature was not unlimited. These visions showed points of convergence and were constrained by a set of rules and themes agreed upon as most relevant for utopian thought, and above all by the function of utopian visions in society.

Utopian images in the prophetic books were concerned mainly with what was conceived as the most fundamental wants during the Persian period, at least amongst the literati. They provided compensators³² for situations about which Yehudites (or at their intellectual elite and groups that shared its perspectives) could do nothing in the earthly world. These visions reflected deeply felt fears as well as desires. Moreover, they allowed the latter to be vicariously fulfilled through the activity of reading and imagining the worlds that these texts portrayed. This was not a vacuous exercise in fantasizing, but a social activity that allowed its participants³³ to draw near to their present, in the only way they could, that which they conceived to be the future of Israel, so they could partake, even if vicariously, in that new, not yet, ideal reality.

Not surprisingly, utopian images emphasized and were deeply involved in promises of seed and land. They were also involved in promises of a messianic David and of an elevated Zion/Jerusalem, that becomes the center/capital of the world/YHWH’s kingdom. They approached these core themes directly, or through related images of gathering of exiles, secure life in the land (whether due to the transformed

³² For the concept of compensators, see W. S. Bainbridge, *The Sociology of Religious Movements* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1997), esp. pp. 11-12.

³³ That is, the literati and those identified with their world, and partially shared it through listening to the literati’s readings.

nature of creation, leadership, a divinely-derived empowerment of Israel, a copious produce of the land, or combinations of them of them). To be sure, Yehudites could only dream about these matters, and Yehudite literati certainly did dream about them. Their dreaming constituted act defiance against the realia of the world as they conceived it, as well as one of support for their local ideology and the institutions that upheld it, and of which they were part.

Being utopias of otherness, they could not but raise matters of boundaries, differences and convergences among Israel and the other nations. Being utopias whose purpose is to compensate for wants, they had to come with assurances that these visions would be surely manifested at some point in the future. References to YHWH, to blurring of past and future, and to the embryonic existence of utopia in the midst of dystopia served well that purpose.

Of course, the core of promises of seed and land, of messianic David and elevated Jerusalem/Zion as the center of the world/YHWH's kingdom, were present not only in utopian visions in prophetic literature as even the most cursive reading of Psalms, the Pentateuch and the so-called deuteronomistic history demonstrates. This is to be expected given the social and discursive conditions in Persian Yehud. There was only a small group of literati who was educated around authoritative texts, and who composed, edited, read, reread and meditated on them, or in other words, people who were bearers of high literacy were similarly socialized in Persian Yehud. The social, economic, political realities of Yehud as understood by the center at Jerusalem influenced them all and led them to react to concerns and worries that characterized the "spirit of the age" as understood from the Jerusalemite center, within the limits of the accepted ideological discourses of the period, and within the main themes.

All this said, a call for proper balance is in order. The book of Jonah served as a meta-prophetic book and as such suggested interpretative keys to its intended and primary readers. In Jonah, despite its messages about boundaries, limited Israelitization, and Jerusalem, there were no utopian images. Defiance, self-identity, and support for the otherness upheld by the literati and Jerusalemite center and its institutions could and did use, but did not necessitate utopian visions, because

they may be expressed in the manner of utopian visions and assurances, but are not dependent on them.³⁴

Likewise, utopian visions and assurances such as those that populate the prophetic books remained in Israel, to be read, reread and interpreted, but ceased to be produced, just as the production of prophetic books ceased at some point in the Persian period. This, of course, does not mean that ideological defiance, self-identity, and support for the otherness were not important ideological and discursive features in the late Second Temple period, as the most cursory study of this period shows. It only means that other paths, including other utopias,³⁵ existed to shape, communicate and reinforce these social goals.

³⁴ Instead Jonah raises the problematic character of both the understandings of other prophetic texts, including utopian ones held by the literati, and places their very claims to knowledge in proportion, as I discussed in *Signs of Jonah: Reading and Rereading in Ancien Yehud* (JSOTSup 367; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2003).

³⁵ It is worth noting that there is shift in the orientation of utopian images between prophetic and apocalyptic books. The former tended to focus the imagination on new and different earthly worlds but not on heavenly ones, unlike the latter. The matter demands examination, but stands beyond the scope of this essay. Still, it is worth noting that estrangement from present reality is a main characteristic that is shared by both types of utopias.