Yahweh's Consciousness: Isaiah 40-48 and Ancient Judean Historical Thought

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Abstract

This essay works toward three goals. First, it lays some groundwork for researching prophetic literature as a source for ancient Judean historical thought. Prophetic literature reveals a great deal about how ancient Judeans thought *about* and *with* their past, as it was represented in their literary repertoire. Second, it examines Isaiah 40-48, to see how this sort of second-order thinking about the past is on display in a particular passage of text. And third, it draws some preliminary conclusions about historical thought in this text and how it relates to historical thinking evident in other Judean literature.

The goals of this essay are threefold. Primarily, I would like to lay some groundwork for researching prophetic literature as a source for ancient Judean historical thought. The prophetic books are packed with metadata for historical study. They reveal a great deal about how ancient Judeans thought *about* and *with* their past, as it was represented in their literary repertoire—the prophetic and the historiographical were closely interrelated in ancient Judah. Secondly, I would like to take a look at Isaiah 40-48 as an exemplar, to see how this sort of second-order thinking about the past is on display in a particular passage of text.[1] And finally, I would like to draw some preliminary conclusions about

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1 In this essay I treat Isaiah 40-48 as a distinct literary unit, without necessarily making any claims about the unit's composition or its compositional interrelationship with any other

historical thought in this text and how it relates to historical thinking evident in other Judean literature. Throughout the essay, I give due attention to Yahweh's role in all this, since, after all, he is the one cast in the main speaking part. The way that Judeans represented *their deity* speaking about history is, in the end, one key to Judean historical thought.

It is no secret that Isaiah 40-48 is full of polemical statements of Yahweh's superiority, declarations of his omnipotence and omniscience vis-à-vis the idols, the no-gods. He can declare the former things and thus their outcomes; he knows not only the past but also what is to come thereafter (e.g., 41:22-23). These chapters in the book of Isaiah have a very specific thrust in relation to Yahweh's knowledge of Israel's story, his understandings of its narrative trajectories, its beginnings and ends, its rhymes and reasons. As Simeon Chavel argues in a recent and noteworthy publication,[2] only Yahweh can truly know "history," for he is its author; others—including Babylonians and their no-gods as well as Israel itself—are impaired in their knowledge because they rely on false, insular understandings of divinity. Humans cannot glean divine know-how from gods they themselves have created, nor can they limit Yahweh, creator of the cosmos, to common perceptions of divine presence or ability. Thus, according to the rhetorical aims of Isaiah 40-48, the rise of the Persian Cyrus, for example, was part and parcel of *Yahweh*'s purposes for Babylon and for Israel, not the purposes of some other (false) deity.[3] Chavel writes, "Cyrus

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possible demarcations within the book of Isaiah. In chs. 40-48 there is, for example, a unified thematic focus on Jacob/Israel, distinct from the focus on Jerusalem/Zion in chs. 49-55. Moreover, 40:3-5 and 48:20-22 form an apparent inclusio. Cf. Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 40-55* (AB 19A; New York: Doubleday, 2002), pp. 59-60. By focusing on chs. 40-48, however, I do not deny that the larger passage of chs. 40-55 also constitutes a kind of unit, and that there are good reasons for reading chs. 40-66 as a unity too. The boundaries between literary units in prophetic books are always fuzzy. On the prophetic book and its particular communicative features, see Ehud Ben Zvi, "The Prophetic Book: A Key Form of Prophetic Literature," in Marvin A. Sweeney and Ehud Ben Zvi (eds.), *The Changing Face of Form Criticism for the Twenty-First Century* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), pp. 276-97. For histories of scholarship on the formation of the so-called Deutero-Isaiah, see, e.g., Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 40-55*, pp. 69-81; Rainer Albertz, *Israel in Exile: The History and Literature of the Sixth Century B.C.E.*, trans. David Green (Studies in Biblical Literature 3; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003), pp. 376-93; Shalom M. Paul, *Isaiah 40-66: Translation and Commentary* (Eerdmans Critical Commentary; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012), pp. 1-12.

2 Simeon Chavel, "Prophetic Imagination in the Light of Narratology and Disability Studies in Isaiah 40-48," *JHS* 14, article 3 (2014); online: http://jhsonline.org/Articles/article_197.pdf (doi:10.5508/jhs.2014.v14.a3).

3 Cf. Ulrich F. Berges, *The Book of Isaiah: Its Composition and Final Form* (trans. Millard C. Lind; Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2012), pp. 304-5.

fulfills the will not of the absurdly embodied Marduk but of the irreducible Yahweh."[4] If only Israel had paid attention to Yahweh, to true divinity and thus to history as it were, the people would have known this.[5]

Indeed, knowledge is a leading motif in these chapters. References to *da'at* ("knowledge"), either true or false, occur in key statements in 40:14; 44:19, 25; and 47:10; and the verbal root *yd'* ("to know") occurs some 30 times throughout chs. 40-48. In the central passage about Cyrus (44:24-45:8), Yahweh's knowledge and knowledge of Yahweh feature prominently. Yahweh knows that Jerusalem and Judah will be re-inhabited and rebuilt, and that Cyrus will do this. Further, by making the Persian Cyrus his servant to fulfill his purposes, Yahweh will make himself known as the one true deity, creator of the cosmos and author of all that happens within it. Cyrus may not have known Yahweh before, but he will know him now, and so will all of creation (45:3-8).[6] Throughout Isaiah 40-48, therefore, Yahweh demonstrates his knowledge. He knows creation, Abraham, and Jacob. He knows the exodus, the people's passing through waters and wandering in the wilderness. He knows Cyrus, of course, as his servant, his

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4   Chavel, "Prophetic Imagination," p. 5.

5   Cf. Danielle Duperreault, "The Poetics of History and the Prophecy of Deutero-Isaiah," in M. J. Boda and L. M. Wray Beal (eds.), *Prophets, Prophecy, and Ancient Israelite Historiography* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2013), pp. 255-74 (259-60).

6   Some scholars maintain that, in this passage, Cyrus does not know or even acknowledge the deity. See, e.g., the translation of NRSV, and cf. Roddy L. Braun, "Cyrus in Second Isaiah and Third Isaiah, Chronicles, Ezra and Nehemiah," in M. P. Graham et al. (eds.), *The Chronicler as Theologian: Essays in Honor of Ralph W. Klein* (JSOTSup 371; London: T&T Clark, 2003), pp. 146-64 (148-49); John Goldingay and David Payne, *Isaiah 40-55* (2 vols.; ICC; London: T&T Clark, 2006), vol. 2, pp. 24-26; Lynette Mitchell, "Remembering Cyrus the Persian: Exploring Monarchy and Freedom in Classical Greece," in D. V. Edelman and E. Ben Zvi (eds.), *Remembering Biblical Figures in the Late Persian and Early Hellenistic Periods: Social Memory and Imagination* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 283-92 (284). Isaiah 45:4-5 twice states that Cyrus did/does not know Yahweh, but this likely refers to the state of their relationship prior to Yahweh's call to service. In both verses, the negated *qatal* verb *lō' yĕda'tānî* ("you did/do not know me") stands in juxtaposition with the preceding *yiqtol* verbs. The Hebrew thus places Cyrus's lack of knowledge in the past, with either a perfective or pluperfective aspect; cf. the translations of LXX, Luther Bibel, KJV, NJPS; also Burkard M. Zapff, *Jesaja 40-55* (Die Neue Echter Bibel; Würzburg: Echter Verlag, 2001), p. 276; Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 40-55* (AB 19A; New York: Doubleday, 2002), p. 244; Chavel, "Prophetic Imagination," pp. 10-11. The verses do not necessarily imply that Cyrus *continued* to be ignorant of the deity after he became the deity's servant. In any case, Cyrus calls Yahweh by name in 2 Chr 36:23, even calling him "God of the heavens" (cf. Ezra 1:2). Yehudites/Judeans thus remembered Cyrus as one who eventually came to know his role as a servant of their universal deity.

anointed one and victor. And he knows of an eventual return to and restoration of Zion/Jerusalem.[7]

My aim here, though, is not to unpack the specifics of Yahweh's knowledge, the precise details of divine knowledge as it is displayed in this portion of the book of Isaiah. What really interests me is how Yahweh *talks about* what he knows. How does he tell Israel's story (or stories), crafting its narrative in this particular passage of prophetic literature? How does Yahweh conceive of Israel's past vis-à-vis its present and future? My research interests are primarily historical and historiographical. Prophetic literature (i.e., prophetic "books" as they emerged in postmonarchic Judah), I submit, should be a major source for our investigations of ancient Judean historical thought. Prophetic literature is, at least in part, *meta*historiographical.[8] The prophetic books, literary artifacts from ancient Judah, represent a kind of second-order thinking about Israel's place in time. They illustrate thinking *about* and *with* Judah's socially

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7   Given the polemics against Babylon and its gods, the knowledge of Cyrus's ascendancy, and statements of a return to Zion/Jerusalem (awaited or completed?), scholars have debated Isaiah 40-48's geographical setting and compositional locale. Is it Babylonia or Judah? Babylonia is the general assumption in scholarship, but recently scholars have begun to question the passage's supposed Babylonian context. See, e.g., Hans M. Barstad, *The Babylonian Captivity of the Book of Isaiah: "Exilic" Judah and the Provenance of Isaiah 40-55* (Oslo: Novus, 1997); and Lena-Sofia Tiemeyer, *For the Comfort of Zion: The Geographical and Theological Location of Isaiah 40-55* (VTSup 139; Leiden: Brill, 2011), both of whom situate these chapters in Judah. Indeed, the many references to "coastlands," for example (40:15; 41:1, 5; 42:4, 12, 15), seem out of place for a Babylonian context (cf. Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 40-55*, p. 197), as do texts like 41:9 and 44:23, which imply a completed return. In a recent contribution, H. G. M. Williamson takes up the issue, surveying linguistic evidence exclusively, and concludes that Babylon is the more likely setting for the composition ("The Setting of Deutero-Isaiah: Some Linguistic Considerations," in Jonathan Stökl and Caroline Waerzeggers [eds.], *Exile and Return: The Babylonian Context* [BZAW 478; Berlin: De Gruyter, 2015], pp. 253-67). Williamson admits, though, that the issue is far from settled and requires further, systematic investigation of all the available evidence, linguistic and otherwise. I agree. However, for the purposes of the present essay, it will have to remain a moot point. In any case, the location of composition seems to have had little effect on how readers of the passage situated themselves imaginatively within space and time. The passage clearly envisions various local and "world" perspectives, as I discuss below, and its inclusion in the book of Isaiah, with its diverse geographical imaginary, speaks to its inherent multivocality on this issue.

8   I say "at least in part" because writing does not belong to any genre or generic category; it participates in generic economies. Cf. Jacques Derrida, "The Law of Genre," trans. Avital Ronell, *Glyph* 7 (1980), pp. 202-232; Alastair Fowler, *Kinds of Literature: An Introduction to the Theory of Genres and Modes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982); Carl Freedman, *Critical Theory and Science Fiction* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 2000), esp. pp. 20-23; John Frow, *Genre* (The New Critical Idiom; London: Routledge, 2006).

remembered stories.[9] An important analogue here is Carol Newsom's work on "historical résumés," that is, the various self-contained recapitulations of Israel's past within ancient Judean literature.[10] "[N]arrating history," writes Newsom, "is a way of thinking, a way of constructing meaning from events by casting them in narrative or story form."[11] Comprehending the form of a historical narrative, then, is to arrive at some understanding of historical thought.[12] Her essay thus works toward a nuanced comprehension of historical thinking in ancient Judah, seeking to relate the various rhymes of Israel's story to its various reasons, in a number of biblical exemplars (e.g., 1 Sam 12; Josh 24; Pss 105 and 106; Ezek 20; Dan 2; 8; 11). Beyond these more explicit historical summaries, however, there is an abundance of more implicit data in prophetic literature that also deserves our attention. For example, in his recent work on the prophetic books, James Linville demonstrates how the themes of creation, uncreation, and re-creation are often interwoven with references to the exile and return—for example in Isa 14:12-14 or Jer 50:17-18, or throughout Amos 9—passages that would recast understandings of concerns past *and* present.[13] Linville states, "Building on earlier myths including those of creation and divine combat, new myths are spun that deal not only with old tropes, but with their interpretation in new situations."[14] Turning back to Isaiah 40-48, we find clear references to the past that frame thinking about the present and future. The exodus event is recalled, for instance, only to imagine a "new thing" (ḥădāšâ), a new path through the wilderness, along which Yahweh will provide

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9   Compare several recent contributions from James R. Linville: "Playing with Maps of Exile: Displacement, Utopia and Disjunction," and "Myth of the Exilic Return: Myth Theory and the Exile as an Eternal Reality in the Prophets," both in Christoph Levin and Ehud Ben Zvi (eds.), *The Concept of Exile in Ancient Israel and its Contexts* (BZAW 404; Berlin: De Gruyter, 2010), pp. 275-94 and 295-308, respectively; also "Mythoprophetics: Some Thoughts," in Ian Douglas Wilson and Diana V. Edelman (eds.), *History, Memory, Hebrew Scriptures: A Festschrift for Ehud Ben Zvi* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2015), pp. 403-15. Linville prefers the terminology of myth, whereas I generally appeal to the concept of historiography, but our approaches are congenial.

10   Carol Newsom, "Rhyme and Reason: The Historical Résumé in Israelite and Early Jewish Thought," in André Lemaire (ed.), *Congress Volume Leiden 2004* (VTSup 109; Leiden: Brill, 2006), pp. 215-33.

11   Newsom, "Rhyme and Reason," pp. 215-16.

12   Cf. Hayden White, "The Question of Narrative in Contemporary Historical Theory," in his collection of essays *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), pp. 26-57.

13   Linville, "Myth of the Exilic Return," pp. 303-6.

14   Linville, "Myth of the Exilic Return," p. 306.

waters and sustenance for his people (43:16-21); and the creation of the cosmos, the ordering of chaos, is remembered in order to introduce a new shepherd for the people, the anointed Cyrus who will rebuild Jerusalem and the cities of Judah (44:24-45:8).[15]

To explore the narrativity of Yahweh's knowledge in prophetic literature, however, is to go beyond exploring *textual* consciousness, that is, allusion and intertextuality.[16] It is to work toward an understanding of Judean historical thinking in general. It is to examine how Judeans remembered and how then they cast memories in written form, how they wrote (hi)story. Another signpost for this kind of work is a recent essay by Danielle Duperreault.[17] Duperreault shows how Judean historiography might have *effected* prophecy in Isaiah 40-55,[18] but it goes both ways. Prophecy (or better: prophetic books) no doubt had an effect on historiography too. If historiographical accounts framed prophetic understandings of the present and future, then—according to recent work on social memory—prophetic literature would in turn shape and reshape readings of the historiography. Social memory has a double function: memories of the past help frame images of the present, but by fitting the present into past frameworks, the past itself takes on different shapes.[19] From our own era, we can observe, for example, how Americans remembered Abraham Lincoln after the assassination of John F. Kennedy: remembering Lincoln as a fallen hero assuaged the shock of Kennedy's death, which as a result reinvigorated memories of Lincoln via the figure of Kennedy.[20] Another example is Sadam Hussein aligning himself with Mesopotamian kings, in the 1990s.[21] There are relevant examples from the ancient world, too. There is, for

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15   Cf. Linville, "Mythoprophetics," p. 408; also Duperreault, "Poetics of History," pp. 261-62. Note the cosmogenic statements in 44:24 and 45:7-8, which encapsulate the Cyrus passage.

16   For a recent and thorough survey of Deutero-Isaiah's literary knowledge and apparent influences, "biblical" and otherwise, see Paul, *Isaiah 40-66*, pp. 44-63. Cf. also earlier commentaries such as Claus Westermann, *Isaiah 40-66* (trans. D. M. G. Stalker; OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1969), pp. 21-27.

17   Duperreault, "Poetics of History," already cited above.

18   Duperreault, "Poetics of History," p. 273.

19   Cf. Barry Schwartz, *Abraham Lincoln and the Forge of National Memory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), pp. 17-20.

20   Barry Schwartz, *Abraham Lincoln in the Post-Heroic Era: History and Memory in Late Twentieth Century America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), pp. 221-28.

21   Hussein actually installed bricks at the base of Babylon's ancient walls with Cuneiform inscriptions that read, "In the era of President Saddam Hussein, the President of Iraq, God preserve him, who rebuilt Babylon, as protector of the great Iraq and the builder

instance, Sargon II of Assyria (reigned 721-705 BCE) taking up the name of Sargon of Akkad (reigned ca. 2300 BCE) and even actively shaping memories of the latter.[22] And the Hebrew Bible is full of similar mnemonic interrelationships, in which past and present are intrinsically linked, framing and shaping each other: Josiah as another David, Elijah as Moses, the exile as exodus, and so on. In each of these examples, modern and ancient, the remembered past engenders possible meanings for present circumstances; but in each the present also describes the past in a certain way, shapes the past and gives it form. It is these formations of the past in the present—specifically, how the stories are narrated in written form and how they interrelate with other, similar stories— that give us some access to historical thought.

Thus, by investigating the narratival interrelationship between the historiographical and the prophetic in ancient Judah, we can begin to work toward

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of civilization." See Douglas Jehl, "Look Who's Stealing Nebuchadnezzar's Thunder," *New York Times* (2 June 1997); online: http://www.nytimes.com/1997/06/02/world/look-who-s-stealing-nebuchadnezzar-s-thunder.html (accessed 13 May 2014). Hussein also authored a novel, *Zabiba wal-Malik*, which first appeared in 2000 (English and German versions are available), and which uses elements of *Gilgamesh* and *The Thousand and One Nights* as allegory for the Gulf War of 1990-91. See David Damrosch, *The Buried Book: The Loss and Rediscovery of the Great Epic of Gilgamesh* (New York: Holt, 2006), pp. 254-72.

22   The Akkadian name Sargon means "the legitimate/true king," a fitting appellation for an upstart ruler founding an empire (Sargon the Great) or one usurping an established throne (Sargon II). See, e.g., Brian Lewis, *The Sargon Legend: A Study of the Akkadian Text and the Tale of the Hero Who Was Exposed at Birth* (ASOR Dissertation Series 4; Cambridge, MA: ASOR, 1980), pp. 101-107 and passim. The famous "Birth Legend of Sargon" (COS 1.133, p. 461), which recounts how Sargon the Great rose from obscurity to kingship, was probably composed during the reign of Sargon II in order to legitimate the latter king's reign. In this case, we are dealing with a kind of propaganda, but the processes of social remembering are nonetheless at play: for Sargon II to draw on memories of Sargon the Great, the former king had to have been a prominent site of memory in the first place; and by drawing on memories of the former Sargon, Sargon II simultaneously reshaped the present memories themselves. Also, as widely discussed in biblical scholarship, the birth story of Moses in Exodus 2 has conspicuous parallels with the "Birth Legend of Sargon," and scholars have used these parallels to discuss the potential socio-political setting(s) for the Moses story (e.g., Lewis, *Sargon Legend*, p. 149; Eckart Otto, "Mose und das Gesetz: Die Mose-Figur als Gegenentwurf Politischer Theologie zur neuassyrischen Königsideologie im 7. Jh. v. Chr.," in Eckart Otto [ed.], *Mose: Ägypten und das Alte Testament* [Stuttgarter Biblische Studien 189; Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 2000], pp. 42-83 [47-67]; idem, *Mose: Geschichte und Legende* [Munich: Beck, 2006], pp. 35-42; Thomas Römer, "Moïse: un héros royal entre échec et divinisation," in Philipe Borgeaud, Thomas Römer, and Youri Volokhine [eds.], *Interprétations de Moïse: Égypte, Judée, Grèce et Rome* [Jerusalem Studies in Religion and Culture 10; Leiden: Brill, 2010], pp. 187-98 [189-90]).

more nuanced understandings of Judean historical thinking. In the balance of this essay, I will briefly demonstrate how Isaiah 40-48 might contribute to such an endeavor, and I will draw some preliminary conclusions based on my brief examination of several texts.

First of all, Yahweh's knowledge of history, his authority over it, stems from his identity as creator of the cosmos. Isaiah 40, for example, with its complex layering of mediating voices,[23] builds its argument for things to come around the fact of Yahweh's creative acts in the past. How does one know that every valley shall be lifted up and every mountain made low (40:4)? How can one trust that Yahweh will rescue and care for his people (40:11)? Because he is the one who measured out the water and dust of the earth, and who stretched out the heavens above it (40:12, 22). Yahweh is not a god created; he is the creator god. Other gods are fashioned by humans, but Yahweh fashioned humans themselves and the cosmos to boot. How, then, would he *not* be able to rescue his people? The rhetoric is clear and powerful, and often commented upon.[24] History, as it were, begins with Yahweh, with his creative abilities and activities. This theme runs the gamut of Isaiah 40-48, cropping up time and again. Indeed, the verbal roots *br'* ("to create") and *yṣr* ("to form"), which of course recall the creation accounts of Genesis, appear frequently in these chapters.[25] Within this particular prophetic discourse, history begins at the beginning, so to speak. Yahweh, both directly and through mediating voices, begins his narrative with creation.[26]

Yahweh's crafting of history in Isaiah 40-48 begins with creation, but from thenceforth he crafts no single storyline. There is a kind of metanarrative at work here, throughout these chapters, a trajectory from creation to punitive destruction to restoration, but Yahweh emplots the overarching narrative

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23   See, e.g., Chavel, "Prophetic Imagination," pp. 14-19, for a thorough discussion.

24   E.g., Westermann, *Isaiah 40-66*, p. 49; John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 40-66* (NICOT; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), pp. 57-58; Zapff, *Jesaja 40-55*, pp. 234-35; Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 40-55*, pp. 107-8, 192-93; Golingay and Payne, *Isaiah 40-55*, vol. 1, pp. 49-51; Ulrich Berges, *Jesaja 40-48* (HThKAT; Freiburg: Herder, 2008), pp. 128-29; Paul, *Isaiah 40-66*, p. 138.

25   The two verbal roots occur no less than twenty-three times in Isaiah 40-48. The root *br'* occurs more frequently in Isaiah 40-48 than in any other passage outside the opening chapters of Genesis, and occurrences of *yṣr* (cf. Gen 2:7-9, 19) are more highly concentrated here in Isaiah than anywhere else.

26   Cf. Duperreault, "Poetics of History," pp. 264-68, who comments that, in Isaiah 40-55, "[c]reation is explicitly historicized" more than in any other prophetic text (265).

variously, through various prophetic statements, and draws its conclusion with a measure of ambiguity. To demonstrate this, I will highlight a few select texts.

Take, for instance, 41:1-16 and 42:1-9.[27] In the first, a prophetic voice asks rhetorically: who has roused a victor to capture nations (*gôyim*) and trample their kings (41:2)? Yahweh answers directly: it is he himself, the one who is the first and last, and thus who has proclaimed history (41:4; cf. 41:25-29). Nations as far as the coastlands (*ʾiyyîm*) tremble (41:5), but the offspring of Abraham, the specially chosen Jacob/Israel—those who were dispersed across the earth— have nothing to fear (41:8-10, 13-14). The text of 42:1-9, to compare, speaks of Yahweh—via his chosen servant—bringing justice to the nations (*gôyim*), of him protecting the feeble, and of the coastlands (*ʾiyyîm*) awaiting his *torah*, his instruction (42:1-4).[28] In this text, Yahweh's covenant people[29] are a light

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27   In the discussion that follows I have bracketed out 41:6-7, statements which, as Blenkinsopp argues, are perhaps misplaced and fit better in the context of ch. 40 (cf. *Isaiah 40-55*, pp. 187-94; but see also Paul, *Isaiah 40-66*, p. 162, who shows some of the possible interconnections between 41:6-7 and its present context).

28   Scholarly work on 42:1-9 has often pondered the precise identity of Yahweh's servant (v. 1) and, at least since the famous and influential work of Bernhard Duhm, has debated the interrelationship between this text and the other so-called *ebed-Jahwe Dichtungen*. See comments in, e.g., Oswalt, *Book of Isaiah: Chapters 40-66*, pp. 107-8; Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 40-55*, pp. 209-12; Zapff, *Jesaja 40-55*, p. 248; Goldingay and Payne, *Isaiah 40-55*, vol. 1, pp. 212-13; Berges, *Jesaja 40-48*, pp. 223-24; and Paul, *Isaiah 40-66*, pp. 18, 184. In any case, Yahweh is the one who empowers the servant and who, by speaking of him, emplots the servant's story, giving it shape and highlighting its main points and purposes. Here, in these brief comments, I want to emphasize the objects and outcomes of the servant's (/Yahweh's) actions rather than the servant himself in this specific text (cf. Westermann, *Isaiah 40-66*, p. 93).

29   The MT reads *bĕrît ʿām* ("covenant of people"; cf. 49:8; and διαθήκην γένους in the LXX), a phrase that has generated some confusion, since one might expect the reverse, *ʿām bĕrît* ("people of covenant") (e.g., NJPS translates *bĕrît ʿām* as "covenant people" but qualifies the text with the footnote "meaning of Heb. uncertain"). Read in conjunction with the following phrase, *ʾôr gôyim* ("light of people"), the verse clearly conveys the idea that Yahweh is giving his servant as a covenant and as a light to the nations (cf. NRSV). The potential for confusion arises, however, when one tries to parse the identities of said servant and people. If Israel is the servant, who is this people? If the servant is Cyrus, what might it mean for the Persian king to be a "covenant"? The genius of the poetry here, in my estimation, lies in its ambiguity, which allows for multiple readings—readings that all find congenial conversation partners elsewhere in the book of Isaiah. For an ancient reader the text could, at once, affirm Israel's status as Yahweh's specially chosen people as well as the servant's role (regardless of his precise identity) in emancipating people everywhere, via a kind of covenantal relationship. See the discussions in, e.g., Delbert R. Hillers,

to these nations (42:6; cf. 49:6, 8). So, on the one hand, in ch. 41, nations unto the coastlands cower and await conquest; and on the other, in ch. 42, nations are in need of rescuing, and the coastlands await divine teaching. These are different stories.

This is, however, not to say that these texts are somehow at odds with one another or even incongruous. They are, instead, views from different angles, different compositions of history, with different focuses and limits.[30] In 41:1-16, after verifying his intent to capture nations far and wide and to strike fear in them (41:1-5), Yahweh narrows his focus to his people specifically (41:8-10), to their particular response to the mighty victor. The image, notably, includes *all* of Israel, even those that were scattered unto the corners of the earth (41:9). In the wake of this victor's march, who should take comfort and find strength in Yahweh?—the descendants of Jacob, all of them from everywhere.[31] Compare this image, then, with the picture in 42:1-9, in which Yahweh's specific people are only one aspect of a much larger scene of redemption. Israel is front and center, to be sure, but the image is even more inclusive in its purview. Here, Yahweh declares that history's reason—the narrative path charted from creation to conclusion—is ultimately *to rescue the nations*, at least those imprisoned and in darkness, via his covenant people (42:6-7). One text examines the status and identification of Israel in particular within the narrative. The other

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"*Běrît 'ām*: 'Emancipation of the People,'" *JBL* 97 (1978), pp. 175-82; Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 40-55*, p. 212; Goldingay and Payne, *Isaiah 40-55*, vol. 1, pp. 227-29; Berges, *Jesaja 40-48*, pp. 236-37; Paul, *Isaiah 40-66*, pp. 189-90. Note also that, here at 42:6, 4QIsa[h] (but not 4QIsa[a]) reads *bryt 'wlm* ("everlasting covenant"), which brings the text in line with Isa 55:3 and 61:8; see Eugene Ulrich (ed.), *The Biblical Qumran Scrolls: Transcriptions and Textual Variants*, vol. 2: *Isaiah–Twelve Minor Prophets* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), pp. 412, 512.

30   Cf. Newsom, "Rhyme and Reason," p. 219.

31   This perspective would have challenged any limited understandings of Israel as those in Babylon (or those returned from there) alone. Cf. Gary N. Knoppers, "Did Jacob Become Judah? The Configuration of Judah's Restoration in Deutero-Isaiah," in József Zsengellér (ed.), *Samaria, Samarians, Samaritans: Studies on Bible, History, and Linguistics* (Studia Samaritana 6; Studia Judaica 66; Berlin: De Gruyter, 2011), pp. 39-67. Knopppers surveys formations of Israelite identity in Ezra-Nehemiah (more exclusive), Chronicles (more inclusive), Ezekiel and Jeremiah (more inclusive, emphasizing the centrality of Jerusalem but also a reconstitution of the twelve tribes), and Isaiah (diverse and shifting formations). For Isaiah 40-55 in particular, he makes a strong case that the references to Jacob/Israel are sometimes more *inclusive* than scholarship usually assumes; that is, these references do not necessarily refer only to Judeans of the Babylonian exile. In this way, Isaiah 40-55 acknowledges and takes part in debate about the "complicated demographic realities" of Judah's/Israel's postmonarchic era (p. 61).

also examines Israel's place in the narrative, but on a larger historical canvas and with more universal interests in mind. One is a kind of local history on a world stage, while the other is a kind of world history that highlights the role of a particular locality.

In light of Yahweh's statements concerning Israel and world history, so to speak, let us now look briefly at 42:18-25. Here Joseph Blenkinsopp comments that there is a somewhat surprising "shift from assurance to censure."[32] He also emphasizes, however, that this sort of shift is common throughout these chapters, and that it demonstrates the difficulty of coming to terms with the reality of Babylonian conquest. How is one supposed to make sense of the catastrophe, to reconcile the past and present? The deaf are supposed to listen, the blind supposed to see (42:18-20), although they could not understand even in the face of burning divine fury (42:25).[33] So how are they to understand now? Indeed, according to the book of Isaiah, to navigate the murky waters of the past and its reasons, one needs "blindsight," to borrow a term from Robert Carroll.[34]

Perhaps there is some insight in the texts that follow. Isaiah 43:1-7 announces a kind of second exodus, a gathering of scattered Israel from every corner of the earth.[35] It, too, briefly offers a world-historical perspective, with Yahweh commenting on how he has exchanged nations for Israel—namely Egypt, Ethiopia, and Seba (43:3)[36]—but its primary concern is to declare the people's gathering, an event mnemonically framed by the exodus from Egypt long ago. The people, whom Yahweh has created (*br'*) and formed (*yṣr*) and redeemed (*g'l*) (43:1, 7), will pass through (*'br*) waters and walk through (*hlk*) fire without harm (43:2). In the subsequent and interconnected speeches, from 43:8 to 44:5,

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32 Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 40-55*, p. 217.

33 Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 40-55*, p. 219, comments that this passage is very much at home with Deuteronomic thinking (e.g., Deut 29:1-3).

34 Robert Carroll, "Blindsight and the Vision Thing: Blindness and Insight in the Book of Isaiah," in C. C. Broyles and C. A. Evans (eds.), *Writing and Reading the Scroll of Isaiah: Studies of an Interpretive Tradition* (VTSup 70; Leiden: Brill, 1997), pp. 79-93. Carroll, pp. 90-91, points out the slippage in Isaiah 40-48 between the idols (who have eyes but cannot see; cf. Pss 115:4-8; 135:15-18) and the blind servant or people (who cannot perceive or understand; cf. also Isaiah 6).

35 So here again there is an inclusive vision of the people, one whose horizon extends beyond the Babylonian exiles and returnees. Cf. Knoppers, "Did Jacob Become Judah?"

36 Cf. Isa 45:14. Note that the Persians did in fact capture Egypt, eventually, but it was Cambyses, not Cyrus, who captured the region around 525 BCE. See Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 40-55*, p. 222; Albertz, *Israel in Exile*, p. 415; Berges, *Jesaja 40-48*, pp. 419-20.

this is a recurring trope, with strong textual linkages to the Song of the Sea (Exod 15:1-21) in particular.[37]

The exodus from Egypt, specifically the miraculous crossing of the sea and the drowning of Pharaoh and his army there, acts as a textual site of memory that would, for readers in ancient Judah, inform and shape thinking about this prophetic discourse. However, in relation to historical thought—that is, how the prophetic discourse evinces thinking about Israel's recent and distant pasts—it is most interesting to consider how these texts talk about remembering (*zkr*). Here, in ch. 43, memory is a kind of blindsight. Throughout the whole of Isaiah 40-48, Yahweh defines himself vis-à-vis the no-gods in terms of his knowledge of all things past, present, and future, his ability to know former things and thus to declare what is to come (e.g., 42:9; 46:8-11). In v. 18, however, in the midst of addressing the people about what actually is to come, he implores them *not* to remember (*zkr*) former things, to dwell *not* upon the things of old. Yahweh recounts how he made a path through the sea for his people, how he brought down chariots and horses (vv. 16-17), but then, in effect, tells the people to forget it. Moreover, firmly establishing this paradox, vv. 19-20 describe the future, the new thing that is in the works, in language that explicitly recalls the past exodus: the path through the wilderness links up with the path through the sea, and the watering of the wilderness is juxtaposed with the memory of the dry sea.[38] The past provides the metanarrative that frames thinking about the present and future, and thus it is to be remembered; but precise details of that past are to be forgotten, apparently. Remembering of the past in relation to the present effects new understandings of the past itself. This line of thought appears again, too, in vv. 25-26. Yahweh promises not to remember (*zkr*) his people's great sins, but then he immediately demands that they remind (*zkr*, Hiph.) him, that they justify their standing before him. Yahweh, it seems, wishes to forget Israel's transgressions but does not remember their righteousness, their special status as his chosen people. How then will Israel go forward? What lies beyond their forecasted time in the wilderness? And does this time in the wilderness signify a hopeful time of restoration, a watering of the desert (e.g., 44:1-5)? Or does it represent a "furnace of affliction"

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37   Cf. Ian Douglas Wilson, "The Song of the Sea and Isaiah: Exodus 15 in Post-monarchic Prophetic Discourse," in Ehud Ben Zvi and Christoph Levin (eds.), *Thinking of Water in the Early Second Temple Period* (BZAW 461; Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014), pp. 123-48, esp. 139-42.

38   Cf. William H. C. Propp, *Water in the Wilderness: A Biblical Motif and Its Mythological Background* (HSM 40; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1987), pp. 101-2. *Pace* Tiemeyer, *Comfort of Zion*, pp. 182-84, who downplays connections with the exodus.

(48:10) for a fundamentally rebellious people, a people rescued for Yahweh's own sake?[39] What, in the end, does exile/exodus stand for?

There are other texts I could highlight, other storylines within the apparent metanarrative. For example, there is Cyrus's emergence as a kind of Davidide, as an anointed shepherd and servant, whose right hand Yahweh holds as he subdues nations and initiates the rebuilding of Jerusalem and its temple—a narrative development that would no doubt blur boundaries of Judean political identity.[40] There is also the description of Babylon's fall in ch. 47, which underscores Babylon's hubristic perspective of itself within the narrative, bringing it in line with its imperial predecessor Assyria (cf. Isaiah 10). And there is, for instance, the counterfactual in 48:17-19, in which Yahweh states to Israel, "If only you had paid heed to my commandments!" In the course of Isaiah 40-48, Yahweh develops a number of plots, various modes of historical thinking, in which his creative work—his formations of the cosmos, of Israel, of the nations and so on—leads to multiple destinations. Some provide reassurance, others censure. Some have a more particular scope, others more universal. Some chastise Israel for its blindness; others call them to remain blind, to forget.

Given these various plots, I would now like to draw a few conclusions about how these chapters in Isaiah represent historical thought, and how this might contribute to our own historical and historiographical interests in ancient Judah and its prophetic literature.

My initial concluding point perhaps goes without saying, but it is nonetheless important to emphasize that Judeans certainly had a kind of speculative consciousness. Judeans thought about the future and about the future-past; that is, they thought about both present *and past* understandings of possible futures, possible historical outcomes. In their minds, the rhymes and reasons of history were fuzzy, not clearly delineated. Curiously, it is primarily in the prophetic books, represented as the direct and/or mediated statements of the deity, that we find this kind of speculation.[41] Judean readers considered history's potential trajectories through the "mind" of Yahweh, which was said

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39   Cf. Ezek 20:13-14; Paul, *Isaiah 40-66*, p. 311.

40   Cf. Ian Douglas Wilson, "Yahweh's Anointed: Cyrus, Deuteronomy's Law of the King, and Yehudite Identity," in Jason M. Silverman and Caroline Waerzeggers (eds.), *Political Memory in and after the Persian Period* (ANEM 13; Atlanta: SBL Press, 2015), pp. 325-61.

41   This is not to say that this sort of thinking occurs *only* in the prophetic books. It occurs, too, in Deuteronomy, for instance, which participates in prophetic discourse while also contributing to historiographical and legal discourse.

to be all knowing and thus by definition *not* speculative. Yahweh formed history, its beginnings and its endings, and history thus stood as a witness to the deity's absolute authorship. Prophetic literature recalls the various stories of Israel's past, those that readers would know from Judah's literary corpora, and it casts these stories as monuments or memorials to Yahweh's function as history's author: creation, the promises to the patriarchs, the exodus, David as an anointed figure of promise, the fall of the monarchy, and so forth. Via the voice of Yahweh, the prophetic books represent and re-figure history's significant events, persons, and locales. In doing so, however, no single representation or interpretation emerges. Instead, a variety of viewpoints, some complementary and some contradictory, are collocated and juxtaposed. A tension exists, therefore, between the absolute authority of Yahweh's history and the generic speculativeness of the prophetic literature itself.

In ancient Judah there was, then, a pronounced hesitancy about how to read and talk about the past. Yahweh's memory was understood to be trustworthy, to be sure. But what about the mnemonic faculties of the Judeans themselves? Isaiah 40-48 clearly knows of and alludes to a litany of Judean literature, especially of the historiographical variety, but its promotion of such literature is fuzzy, its confidence in human understandings of the past, shaky. The texts are keenly aware of the paradox of memory, how it preserves and also misleads. As intellectual historian Allan Megill observes, historiography, as represented for example in the classical works of Herodotus and Thucydides, is marked by an "unresolving tension" between conflicting attitudes or claims.[42] Historians cannot claim exclusivity for their accounts, but at the same time they cannot deny the import of the search for "what *really* happened."[43] Of course, prophetic literature is not history-writing proper—it is just as *a*historiographical as it is historiographical—but its interest in the past evinces a similar kind of tension in Judean historical thought in general.

The prophetic messages of Isaiah 40-48 would at once affirm and challenge the rhymes and reasons of other accounts, other readings of Israel's overarching story. Texts like ch. 48, with its censuring of the people, its emphasis on Israel's obstinacy and iron neck (48:4), for instance, would recall the words of Moses in Torah (e.g., Exod 32:9; Deut 9:6, 13) and reinforce the narrative trajectory of the so-called Primary History. That history ends with a somewhat

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42   Allan Megill, with contributions by Steven Shepard and Phillip Honenberger, *Historical Knowledge, Historical Error: A Contemporary Guide to Practice* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), p. 2.

43   Megill, *Historical Knowledge*, p. 4 (italics in the original).

ironic statement: the elevation of the Davidide Jehoiachin, but in the court of Babylon, Judah's foreign conqueror (2 Kgs 25:27-30). This statement at the end of 2 Kings likely indicates another exodus,[44] but such an indication would include all that goes along with the journey: hope and despair, redemption and failure, and so on.[45] The historical conclusion in 2 Kings thus has ties with Isaiah 40-48's own multivocal representation of exile and exodus, its "combination of good news and confrontation," as Goldingay and Payne put it.[46] Other texts in Isaiah 40-48, however, align themselves more closely with still other versions of the story. The emergence of Cyrus as anointed temple-builder in chs. 44-45, for example, links up with Chronicles' conclusion, in which Cyrus, as Yahweh's chosen regent, takes up again the Davidic initiative.[47]

Texts like Isaiah 40-48, therefore, would have affected and *effected* readings of historiographical literature. Prophetic texts would contribute to a synthesizing dialectic that brought about new understandings, fresh readings, of historiographical accounts. Social memory research shows time and time again how the past frames thinking about the present and future, but present and future concerns also shape thinking about the past, as I emphasized at the outset. Ancient Judeans were concerned with finding some measure of truth in history, what to remember, what to forget, how they fit in the ongoing narrative. They knew that *Yahweh* knew, for sure, but they were unsure of how to comprehend the divine knowledge as it was represented in their literature. Isaiah 40-48 nicely demonstrates this.

To conclude, I want to make clear that my comments here only suggest an avenue for going forward. I have highlighted some of the historical thought embedded in Isaiah 40-48, couched in Yahweh's speeches, but I do not mean to imply that we can simply theorize broadly about Judean historical thinking from any one passage. There is much more work to be done: situating this particular passage within its immediate discursive settings—i.e., within the larger unit(s) of Deutero-Isaiah and within the *book* of Isaiah in its early Second Temple context—and then comparing the discourse of this book with other prophetic discourses. Only then may we confidently address pos-

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44   Cf. Michael J. Chan, "Joseph and Jehoiachin: On the Edge of Exodus," ZAW 125 (2013), pp. 566-77.

45   Cf. Ian Douglas Wilson, "Joseph, Jehoiachin, and Cyrus: On Book Endings, Exoduses and Exiles, and Yehudite/Judean Social Remembering," ZAW 126 (2014), pp. 521-34.

46   Goldingay and Payne, *Isaiah 40-55*, vol. 2, p. 116.

47   In Chronicles, human dynasties are clearly ephemeral, positioned underneath the universal and eternal reign of the deity. Cf. H. G. M. Williamson, *1 and 2 Chronicles* (NCBC; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1982), pp. 26-27.

sible interrelationships across the discursive boundaries of literary corpora in general, in ancient Judah. Working toward this goal would illuminate our knowledge of Judah's intellectual history, as it were, and would also enrich our own attempts at developing an historical epistemology for today.[48] This essay is only a beginning, but it's a good place to start.

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48   For a recent discussion of contemporary historical epistemology in our discipline, see Daniel D. Pioske, "Retracing a Remembered Past: Methodological Remarks on Memory, History, and the Hebrew Bible," *BibInt* 23 (2015), pp. 291-315.