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The Roots of the Messianic Idea

Messianic¹ visions are found for the first time in the prophecies of Isaiah and Micah, who were both active during the reigns of Ahaz and Hezekiah, in 743-698 BCE, when the power of the Assyrian Empire was at its peak. These visions include:

1) Isaiah 2:2-4 and its parallel in Micah 4:1-4, the so-called Temple Mount vision.

This vision may be defined as the vision of the nations' pilgrimage to Zion;

2) Isaiah 9:1-6, which hallows the birth of the redeemer-king who will found his kingdom in justice and righteousness, and which is to be compared with Micah 5:1 and Isaiah 7:4;

3) Isaiah 11:1-10, the vision of the ideal king and the universal, cosmic empire of peace.

I

The two visions of universal peace, Isaiah 2:2-6 and 11:1-10, differ from each other in that, in the first, the Lord's Temple, as the high court, is the center of interest; the earthly king does not figure at all. In the second vision, by contrast, the earthly king stands at the center and the Temple plays no role. It is commonly supposed that these two visions present two different outlooks on the future. In the first, God is king; the second presumes the presence of a king of flesh and blood. In fact, however, these pericopes simply represent two types of literary composition concerning the subject of the ideal capital city. As I have shown elsewhere,² there existed in the ancient Near

East two types of hymnic literary composition – one, in which the *temple* motif predominates, and a second, in which the *royal court* motif is predominant. The composition of Isaiah's first vision draws on the tradition of the temple city, while the second deploys motifs traditionally associated with the royal court.

There is no reason to deny the authenticity of any of these three Isaianic oracles, since the phraseology and ideology of these passages overlap those of his other prophecies.³ Furthermore, the oracles fit in perfectly with his pacifistic ideology, as Kaufman has demonstrated.⁴ The fact that the vision of the pilgrims is found in both

¹ The term "messianic" (Greek: Christos) for the future redeemer is a late post-exilic one. In the First Temple period, "Messiah" (lit. "annointed one") refers to the high priest and the king, who were annointed at their enthronements. Using "Messiah" to signify redeemer is, however, also a permissible usage as the future redeemer will spring from the Davidic line, whose kings are designated (cf. Ps 2:2).

² "Literary Creativity," in A. Malamat, A. and J. Eph'al (eds.), *The World History of the Jewish People, Vol. V: The Age of the Monarchies – Culture and Society* (Jerusalem, 1979), 58-62.

³ Y. Kaufman, *Toledot ha'emunah hayisra'elit, Vol. III* (Tel Aviv, 1947), 192-292 (Hebrew).

⁴ Kaufman, *Toledot*, 200-201.

Isaiah and his contemporary Micah indicates that their views grew from a common background. I shall show presently that they

were adjusted to the Israelite monotheistic belief.

II

I shall first outline the historical circumstances of the visions:

Both Isaiah⁵ and Micah speak about the birth of the redeemer, a scion of David, who will establish peace amongst the nations of the world. The difference between these two prophets is that Isaiah, in 11:4, envisages peace achieved by spiritual means, “by the rod of his mouth” (בַּשֵּׁבֶט פִּי) (פִּי), whereas Micah envisages peace achieved by sword, as found in 5:1-5:

And you, from Bethlehem of Efrath...., from you shall come forth (יָצֵא) the ruler of Israel for me... he will leave them until the time when his mother give birth...., he shall stand and shepherd by the might of YHWH, by the power of the name of YHWH his God. They shall dwell secure and wax great to the ends of the earth. And such will be the peace (שָׁלוֹם): when Assyria comes to our land and tramples our castles, we will raise against him seven shepherds, eight princely men, who will shepherd Assyria's land by sword, the land of Nimrod with drawn blades...

The visions of Isaiah and Micah are both centered, as we shall see, around the newborn child, namely, the newly crowned Hezekiah, who is seen as the redeemer of Israel from the yoke of Assyria. Redemption from Assyria implies the reunification of the north, Israel, and the south, Judah. It seems that during the reign of Hezekiah, the hatred between Israel and Judah vanished and some kind of symbiosis between the sister nations was established. This is re-

flected in Isaiah's oracle of consolation from that time, as found in 11:13: “Ephraim's jealousy shall vanish and Judah shall not harass Ephraim.” As the oracle continues – returning to 11:4 – we read of the expansion of Israel and Judah in two directions, towards Philistine territory in the west and towards Ammon, Moab and Edom in the east. The period of Hezekiah was indeed a period of great expansion. In 2 Kings 18:8, we hear of Hezekiah overrunning Philistia as far as Gaza, and from 1 Chronicles 4:39-43, we learn about the incursion of the Simeonites towards Gerar in the west and towards Se'ir in the south in Hezekiah's time.

One cannot deny that the prophecies of Isaiah underwent redaction, changes and additions, but to surmise that whole pericopes were added looks far-fetched. For example, the drying of the Egyptian sea and rivers, found in 11:15-16, has its antecedents in 10:24, 26. Similarly, the song of chapter 12 is to be considered like the Song of the Sea in Exodus 15, a dramatic conclusion to the redemption story. The authenticity of Isaiah 11:11-16 may also be shown by the following points:

1. The three territorial units related to Egypt mentioned in Isaiah 11:11, Egypt, Pathros and Cush, appear in the same order in the Essarhadon inscriptions, and this topographical combination does not occur elsewhere, as Parpola has shown.⁶

⁵ The late dating of Isaiah's prophecies by H. Barth (*Die Jesaja Worte in der Josazeit* [Neukirchen, 1977], 141ff.) is too subjective for me to accept, despite his deep anal-

ysis of the text.

⁶ S. Parpola, *Neo-Assyrian Toponyms* (AOAT 6, 1970).

2. The jealousy of Ephraim vis-à-vis Judah in Isaiah 11:13 is also mentioned in Isaiah 9:20.

3. It is during the period of Hezekiah that “the remnant of Israel – and the house of Jacob” returns to YHWH, to “mighty God,” אֱלֹהֵי גִבּוֹר.⁷ As Henri Cazelles perceived,⁸ the “remnant which returns,” שְׂאֵר יִשְׂרָאֵל, represents the Israelites from the north, who join Judah and accept the authority of Hezekiah, who bore the title, among others, *’el gbwr* (confer Isaiah 9:5). The same imagery is found in Micah 5:1. Micah speaks of the youngest of the clans of Judah, who will rule Israel. After that, in 5:1-2, the rest of his brethren will return to the Children of Israel.

4. Hezekiah’s reign was also a time of religious renaissance. Hezekiah turned back to the God of Israel, as expressed by his demol-

ishing the high places and crushing the copper snake, to which people had burned incense. For this reason he was lauded as the king who trusted in God and who did not turn away from him. See 2 Kings 18:5-6.

When the prophet Isaiah spoke, in 9:5-6, of “the child born to us,” who will bring redemption, and, in 11:1-9, of a new scion sprouting from the stump of Jesse, who will judge the peoples “with the rod of his mouth,” it is beyond doubt that he was referring to Hezekiah. No wonder that some of the sages even identified Hezekiah with the Messiah. Babylonian *Sanhedrin* 99a records that Rabbi Hillel, a 3rd century CE *amora*, dared to proclaim, “There is no Messiah for Israel, since he was consumed in the days of Hezekiah.”

III

The truth of the matter, however, is that these visions of Isaiah are of an idealistic and utopian nature and cannot be realized in the conventional human condition. The cohabitation of wolf and lamb, and of lion and calf, as described in Isaiah 11:1-9, is inconceivable in empirical reality. We have no choice but to admit that the vision reflects a utopian reality and not the real world in which man lives. Indeed, such ideal depictions are also found in Mesopotamian literature, where they refer to the ideal situation that existed in the “paradise” at the origin of history. I quote from *Enki and Nishursag*:

In Dilmun (the Sumerian “Garden of Eden”) lion will not kill, wolf will not snatch lamb...⁹

And from *Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta*:

A time when there was no serpent, when there was no scorpion;
A time when there was no hyena, when there was no lion...
A time when there was neither fear nor terror.¹⁰

By the same token, the descriptions of the ideal *king* in Israel are also found in Mesopotamian oracles. We read there of a new king who will arise and judge the land wisely. The king will eradicate evil between brothers; he will ingather the exiles and secure the dynasty forever. Especially enlightening in this regard is the neo-Babylonian period prophecy from Uruk (= Erech):¹¹

⁷ Isa 10:20-21.

⁸ H. Cazelles, “Le nom she’ar yashub etc.,” *Proceedings of the Eighth World Congress of Jewish Studies, Division A, Jerusalem, 1982* (Jerusalem, 1982), 47-50.

⁹ Cf. J. Klein and S. Shifra, *In Those Distant Days: An*

Anthology of Mesopotamian Literature in Hebrew (Tel Aviv, 1996), 55-70 (Hebrew).

¹⁰ See S. N. Kramer, “The ‘Babel of Tongues’: A Sumerian Version,” *JAOS* 88 (1968), 109.

A king will arise in Uruk who will provide justice in the land... he will renew Uruk. The gates of Uruk he will build of lapis lazuli... After him, his son will arise in Uruk and become master over the world... his dynasty will be established forever. The kings of Uruk will exercise rulership like gods.

In the Hellenistic and Roman periods, the prophecies of the birth of a redeemer-king and of universal, cosmic peace were combined. Typical are the Sibylline Oracles.¹² Although in their present form they are clearly influenced by Israelite prophecy, the fact that they originate in Greece and that similar motifs also occur in Mesopotamian literature indicates that these oracles preserve a general Eastern tradition. I quote a passage from III 741-795:

For all the all-bearing earth will give the most excellent unlimited fruit to mortals...sweet honey from heaven...the earth will break forth sweet fountains of white milk...there will be no sword on earth to din for battle...but there will be great peace throughout the earth. King will be friend to king to the end of the age...a common law for men throughout the whole earth... from every land they will bring incense and gifts to the house of the great God. *Rejoice, maiden, and be glad*, for the one who created heaven and earth has given joy of the age. He will dwell in you. You will have immortal light. Wolves and lambs will eat grass together in the mountains. Leopards will feed together with kids... The flesh-eating lion will eat husks at the manger like an ox and mere infant children will lead them with ropes...serpents and asps will sleep with babies and will not harm them, for the hand of God will be upon them.

This vision achieved its fullest expression in Virgil's Fourth Eclogue, which is attributed to the Sibyl of Cumae, and which contains the entire range of soteriological motifs known to us from Israelite and Mesopotamian prophecy. It is a vision of universal harmony, ushered in by the birth of a godlike child.¹³ The birth is announced to the mother, as in Isaiah 7:14ff. and 9:5-6. It symbolized the advent of a glorious era, the era of eternal peace, an era characterized not only by peace among men, but also among beasts, when the serpent, too, will perish. These are ideas found in Isaiah 11, but, as we have seen, they are rooted in ancient Mesopotamian tradition concerning the ideal era of *creation*.

The high honors, Latin: *honores*, bestowed on the child are undoubtedly the royal titles proclaimed for the king on his coronation, and are those about which we read in Isaiah 9:5-6 regarding the child who will bear the office on his shoulder.¹⁴ As will be shown presently, these names, too, are titles announced at his coronation. The Roman Senate bestowed similar titles on Julius Caesar.

The joy of the heavens, the sea and the earth at the coronation of the redeemer-king in Virgil is like their joy when the God of Israel ascends the throne to save the universe in Psalms 96:10-13 and 98:6-9. The same phrases also appear in connection with the coronation proclamation of liberation issued by Egyptian kings, to be discussed below.

The "root" coming out of the stem of

¹¹ H. Hunger and S. Kaufman, "A New Akkadian Prophecy Text," *JAOS* 95 (1975), 371-375.

¹² J. J. Collins, "The Sibylline Oracles," in J. Charlesworth (ed.), *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* (1983), vol. I, 377-472.

¹³ See E. Norden, *Die Geburt des Kindes, Geschichte einer Religiösen Idee* (Stuttgart, 1924).

¹⁴ This idiom of bearing the office on one's shoulder occurs also in Isa 22:22: "I will put the key of the house

of David on his shoulder" and is also illustrated in Egyptian coronation iconography. Thus we see in Hatshepsut's coronation scene Thothmes III laying his hand on her shoulder; see E. Nabilie, *The Temple of Deir-el-Bahri, Part Two* (London, 1898), pl. LXI; H. Breasted, *Ancient Records of Egypt II* (Chicago, 1906-1907), 237; K. Sethe, *Urkunden der 18. Dynastie, Vol. VI* (Leipzig, 1909), 257ff. (My thanks to Prof. J. Shiron-Grumach for locating some of these references.)

Jesse with which Isaiah 11:1-9 opens – “A rod shall grow out from the stump of Jesse, a branch shall sprout from his roots” – this root, too, is characteristic of the dynastic line of Assyrian kings, for example, the precious branch of Baltil – *pir'u* BAL.TIL. *šūqūru* – is applied to Tiglath-pileser III.¹⁵ The branch (פֶּאֶרֶךְ) appears in the book of Isaiah once only, in 10:33, in the context of the destruction of the Assyrian Empire, where it precedes the vision of eternal peace in 11:1-10. This juxtaposition may indicate that Isaiah knew the term *pir'u* as a royal Assyrian notation associated with the apogee of the empire; in 10:33 the term stands for the cruel Assyrian Empire before its fall.

Similar epithets are attested in the annals of King Sargon and his successors: “precious branch of Assur, of royal lineage, of ancient stock” – *pir'u* BAL.TIL *šūqūru zēr šarrūti kisitti šāti*.¹⁶ In an inscription of Nebuchadnezzar I, we read: “offspring of Enmeduranki, king of Sippar, a branch of Nippur of ancient stock.”¹⁷

The attributes of the ideal king that appear in Isaiah 11 – wisdom, insight, counsel and valour, knowledge and fear of God – these, too, are common in Mesopotamian literature, as royal titles. The king is called the possessor of wisdom and knowledge, a warrior and counselor, and one who knows fear of God.¹⁸

That the prophecy in Isaiah 9:1-6 about the birth of a king and the titles conferred on him on that occasion corresponds to a coronation and has mythological overtones was perceived by Albrecht Alt.¹⁹ The divine

nature of the birth of the king also occurs in Psalms 2:6-7:

But I have enthroned my king on Zion my holy mountain; “I will gather you in my lap (אָסִיפֶךָ בְּחִיקִי).”²⁰ I will say to him, “You are my son; this day I became your father.”

This image of God giving birth, as it were, to the king occurs also in 2 Samuel 7:14 and in Psalms 89:27-28, as well as being widely attested in ancient Near Eastern literature. For example, we read in an Egyptian birth legend of the birth of the new king:

The god says to the child, “You are king that will appear on the throne of Horus – will be put in the lap.”²¹

The idea was also prevalent in Mesopotamian hymns. We read of the Sumerian king, Šulgi, *circa* 2094-2047 BCE:

Your father who begot you, holy Lugalbanda, called your name: Hero whom An knows among the gods.²²

In another hymn to the birth of Šulgi, we have:

Enlil thought up a great thing...the hidden secrets of his holy thought he brought out from the temple...the son of the “faithful man” will long hold the scepter, their throne will never be overthrown.

The hymn goes on:

The en-priestess gave birth to a “faithful man” from (the semen) which has been placed in her womb.

¹⁵ See H. Tadmor, *Inscriptions of Tiglath-Pileser III, King of Assyria* (Jerusalem, 1994), 40-41.

¹⁶ See M.-J. Seux, *Épithètes royales akkadiennes et sumériennes* (Paris, 1967), 73, 376.

¹⁷ W. G. Lambert, *Le palais et la royauté* (Paris, 1974), 474.

¹⁸ N. B. especially the terms: *hassu, mudû, emqu, and eršû*; see Seux (supra, n. 16) *sub voci*.

¹⁹ A. Alt, “Jesaja 8,23-9,6, Befreiungsnacht und Krönungstag,” *Kleine Schriften, Vol. II* (Munich, 1959), 206-

25.

²⁰ N. H. Tur-Sinai, *פֶּשֶׁט שֶׁל מִקְרָא* (Jerusalem, 1962-1968), vol. IV, 5-6; cf. Ruth 4:16.

²¹ H. Brunner, “Die Geburt des Gott-Königs,” *Ägyptische Abhandlungen* 10 (1964), 117ff.

²² J. Klein, “The Coronation and Consecration of Šulgi in the Ekur (Šulgi G.),” in M. Cogan and I. Eph'al (eds.), *Ah, Assyria... Studies in Assyrian History and Ancient Near Eastern Historiography Presented to Hayim Tadmor* (Jerusalem, 1991).

And it says:

Enlil, the powerful shepherd, caused the young man to emerge. A child most suitable for kingship and throne-dais – it was Šulgi. A lion's seed, who makes the *kur* prosper, the beloved of Ninlil, he was granted authority in the Ekur, the king of Ur, he of the radiant heart, the shepherd, the protective genius of the land gave him (Enlil) as a good name.²³

It seems that in Israel the “birth” was a metaphor for adoption and was not meant to be taken literally, but this aspect will have to be developed on another occasion.²⁴

The divine titles in Isaiah 9:5-6, as I indicated before, recall the five titles conferred on the Egyptian king at his coronation. For example, Horemheb, 1335-1315

BCE,²⁵ receives the following honorifics: Successful Planner, Great in Wonders, Full with Truth, Elected by Re, and Beloved by Amon. These titles are not so far from those in Isaiah 9:5-6: Wonderful in Planning (פלא יועץ), Mighty God (אל גבור), Eternal Father (אברער), and Prince of Peace (שר שלום). The fifth title is missing, but something of it may be found in the letters *lamed-mem* at the beginning of verse 6. The titles granted to Julius Caesar by the Senate are similar: Holy, Protected, Father of Fathers, Graceful, and (Outstanding) Leader.²⁶ According to Dio Cassius, the titles were: Father, High Priest, Protected, Hero, and God.²⁷ As has been suggested, the whole coronation procedure in Rome is taken over from the Eastern monarchies.²⁸

IV

Isaiah's vision of the Temple Mount in Isaiah 2:2-6 (with its parallel in Micah 4:1-4), namely, the pilgrimage of nations to Zion, also stems from the well-known ancient convention of a royal temple located at the navel of the cosmos. This convention, investigated by Wensinck,²⁹ is comprised of five elements: the temple is (1) on the highest mountain, (2) patterned on a heavenly temple, (3) located at the center of the world, (4) the source of life and fertility for the cosmos, and (5) the point of origin for the creation of the world. All these elements can be found in the ide-

ologies of Nippur, which was the central Sumerian temple, Babylon with its Ziqqurat, Greek Delphi, Israelite Jerusalem, and Moslem Mecca.

The first motif occurs in Isaiah 2 and Micah 4, as well as in the temple vision of Ezekiel 40:2, in which he sees the Temple “on a very high mountain” – whence, incidentally, the notion that Mount Zion is located at the summit of Zaphon, namely, Mount Zaphon, the highest mountain in northern Syria, identified as Jebel Akra, which stands 2.280 meters high. The second motif, an earthly temple patterned on a

²³ J. Klein, “The Birth of a Crown Prince in the Temple: Neo-Sumerian Literary Topos,” *La Femme dans le Proche-Orient Antique* (Paris, 1987), 97-106; idem, “The Coronation,” 292ff.

²⁴ See M. Weinfeld, “The Covenantal Aspect of the Promise of the Land to Israel,” *The Promise of the Land, the Inheritance of the Land of Canaan by the Israelites* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, Oxford, 1993), 241-49, esp. 244-48.

²⁵ Breasted, *Ancient Records of Egypt II*, 29.

²⁶ ἱερός καὶ ἄσινλος, πατὴρ πατριδος, εὐεργέτης, προστατης (Arrian b.c. II 601-602).

²⁷ πατὴρ, ἀρχιερέυς, ἄσινλος, ἦως, θεός (Dio Cassius I 49).

²⁸ F. Cumont, *Les Religions Orientales dans le paganisme Romain* (1927), 207 n. 5.

²⁹ A. J. Wensinck, *The Idea of the Western Semites Concerning the Navel of the Earth* (Amsterdam, 1916); see also H. V. Hermann, *Omphalos* (Orbis Antiquus XIII; Munster, 1959).

heavenly temple, is vividly pictured in Isaiah 6.³⁰ Isaiah sees the Lord enthroned high and lofty, surrounded by His angels, so that the reader wonders whether he is seeing the real temple or the heavenly one (confer 1 Kings 22:19). The third motif, the temple being situated at the center of the world, finds expression in the words of Ezekiel, in 5:5: "I set this Jerusalem in the midst of nations, with countries round about her." The same idea recurs in 38:12, in his reference to Jerusalem as the navel of the earth.³¹ The fourth motif, the temple as the source of life and fertility for the whole universe, occurs in Ezekiel 47:1-12: "... water was issuing from below the threshold of the house, fertilizing the earth (confer Joel 4:18; Zechariah 14:8; Psalms 46:8). The fifth motif, the temple as the point of origin of the creation, can be found in a tradition from the Second Temple period, of the **אבן שתיה**,³² the foundation stone.

It is clear that the vision of the City in both Isaiah and Micah has its roots in Near Eastern tradition. As early as the end of the third millennium and the beginning of the second millennium BCE, Mesopotamian texts mention a universal center to which nations stream from all ends of the earth, bringing with them offerings and gifts, prostrating themselves and rendering prayers to the great god in the sanctuary. The temple city is portrayed as brimming with splendor and glory, a place where the oppressor and the wicked do not dwell, but

which houses perpetual righteousness and justice. Let us examine the most prominent motifs found in hymns to Enlil³³ and to Ningirsu³⁴ that are paralleled in Hebrew prophecy.

1) The peoples acknowledge the sovereignty of the god in the sanctuary of the capital. In the hymn to Enlil at Nippur, we read, "The most distant lands you subdue...", and in the hymn to Ningirsu at Lagash, "The awe of the temple lies over all foreign lands; to its name gather strangers from all the ends of the heavens." Compare Psalms 47; 48; and 76; Isaiah 2:1-4; Micah 4:1-4; Joel 4:1ff.; Zephania 3:15ff.; and Haggai 2:7.

2) The peoples bring tribute to the god in the capital. The hymn to the god at Nippur says, "All the lords and princes bring there their pure gifts; their offerings and heavy tribute they brought into the storehouse." Compare Isaiah 18:7; 60:5ff; Zephania 3:10; Haggai 2:7; Psalms 68:32-33; 76:12; and 96:8.

3) Nations come to worship the god in the capital sanctuary. In the hymn to the god at Nippur we read, "All the lands bow down to it... All the lords and princes... offerings and prayers they array for you...", and in the hymn to Ningirsu at Lagash, "In order to set the righteous upright and to subjugate the wicked will the temple be established, the seat of judgment erected." Compare Psalms 96:11-13; 98:9; Isaiah 2:1-4, again in Micah 4:1-4; and see also Psalms 98:8-9; 47:9; and 67:4-9.

Isaiah imbued these Mesopotamian concepts with a particular, spiritual dimension. Peace will not be attained by force but by

³⁰ See A. Aptowizer, "The Heavenly Temple According to the Legends," *Tarbiz* 2 (1931), 137-154, 257-77 (Hebrew).

³¹ *Tabur ha'aretz* may also be interpreted as "rounded hill" (see H. Eshel and Z. Erlich, "Abimelech's First Battle with the Lords of Shechem," *Tarbiz* 58 [1988], 111-16; compare Akkadian *abunnāt māt nakrim*, which means, "the center of the enemy's territory" (see A. Goetze, *Old Babylonian Omen Texts* [Yale Oriental Series 10; New Haven, 1947], 41), but this does not justify the conclusion that the expression *abunnātu* has no cosmological significance; see M. Weinfeld, "Zion and Jerusalem as Religious and Political Capital: Ide-

ology and Utopia," in R. Friedman (ed.), *The Poet and the Historian: Essays in Literary and Historical Biblical Criticism* (Harvard Semitic Studies 26; Chico, California, 1983), 106 n. 55.

³² *Pirke de R. Eliezer* 35. **שהירערב** is related to **שהירערב** (the "warp and weft" in weaving); see S. Lieberman, *Tosefta Kipshuta*, pt. 4: *Kippurim*, 772-73.

³³ J. Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*³ (Princeton, 1969), 573ff.

³⁴ A. Falkenstein and W. von Soden, *Sumerische und akkadische Hymnen und Gebete* (Zurich, 1953), 147, 152, 169, 170.

the spirit. The peoples will stream to the mountain of the Lord's temple to seek to learn from the ways of the Lord and from His paths. "For Torah (namely, instruction) shall come forth from Zion, the word of the Lord from Jerusalem (Isaiah 2:2-4). Having

acknowledged the sovereignty of the God of Israel, "they will beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks...and they will learn war no more" (Isaiah 2:4).

V

The question that needs to be answered is, why was it, in this time of Isaiah, that these eschatological utopian beliefs came to be put into literary form? What was it about the reign of Hezekiah that gave rise to messianic visions?

The point of departure is the year 727 BCE, a year that saw the death of both Tiglath-pileser III, the great ruler of Assyria, and Ahaz, King of Judah. The death of these two kings was perceived as a good omen for Israel and Judah. Tiglath-pileser had torn the Galilee and the Gilead lands from Israel, and had conquered the Way of the Sea. This was a moment of great darkness, as Isaiah expresses it in 8:23. The death of Ahaz, who had pledged allegiance to Assyria, and the succession of Hezekiah were thus a most meaningful turning point. The prophecy in Isaiah 9:1-6 begins with a description of darkness, in v. 1, and immediately afterwards comes a burst of great light for the people of Israel: "The people that walked in darkness have seen a brilliant light..." It is beyond doubt that the light refers to the crown prince, Hezekiah, whose reign would

bring redemption. His birth is hailed in the hymnic passage of 9:5: "For a child has been born to us; a son has been given to us." Upon his coronation, Hezekiah is accorded his full titles, the five regal attributes listed above, but the most hallowed element of all in this prophecy is that he sits upon David's throne, firmly established in justice and righteousness, as it was in David's time.

Micah, Isaiah's contemporary, also speaks of a woman giving birth to the redeemer in Bethlehem, where David was born, in 5:1ff. He states explicitly that the (northern) brethren will return to Israel.

These rosy hopes engendered the other eschatological visions of Isaiah, the Temple Mount vision, in 2:2-6, and the vision of cosmic, universal peace, in 11:1-10. These visions apparently took shape in the years between 720 and 710 BCE, a time of great national expansion before the onset of the gloomy Sennacherib period, yet even the crisis then could not impair the visions of Jerusalem, and Sennacherib's failure to capture the city reinforced Jerusalem's spiritual status.

Concluding Remarks

To summarize, the visions of the birth of a redeemer, of the pilgrimage of nations to the Temple Mount, and of the ideal king establishing eternal peace had been existent in the Near East since early in the second

millennium BCE. They burst out in Israel during the reign of Hezekiah because of particular circumstances – the deaths of the tyrant Tiglath-pileser III and Ahaz, the impious king who had concluded a treaty with

the Assyrian king.

That Isaiah drew not only on Israelite tradition, but also on non-Israelite sources is evident from the following additional points:

1) The name מהר שלל חשם (Speed-spoil-make haste-plunder) in Isaiah 8:3 is an Egyptian loan-phrase, as most commentators have argued.³⁵

2) Isaiah 10:5-6 says, “O Assyria, rod of my anger...I send him against a godless nation...to take spoil and seize booty.”³⁶ Both the idea and its formulation are found in the Esarhaddon inscriptions:³⁷

The great god Aššur gave in my hand a rod of anger (*šibirru ezzu*)... he commanded me to spoil and pillage (*ana habāti šalāli*) the nation that sinned against me.

3) The pair, *pulḫu melammu*, “fear and glory,” so common in the Assyrian depictions of the “doomsday,” appears literally in

Isaiah 2:10, מפּי פּחד ה' ומהדרר גא, and like the Assyrian description, here, too, men hide in caves following the appearance of God and king.³⁸

One final post-script to return us from Messianic vision and hope to historical reality: Just as Virgil showed his adoration of Augustus Caesar by composing a vision of eternal peace in his honor, so Isaiah wrought visions of eternal peace in honor of Hezekiah's coronation. Later, Hezekiah's reliance on horses and chariots from Egypt caused the prophet grievous disappointment (see 30:1-2 and 31:1). The attitude of Jeremiah to King Zedekiah suffered a similar reverse. On the latter's accession to the throne, Jeremiah heralded him, in 23:5-6, as צמח צדק, “a branch of righteousness” of David's line, who will save Israel and Judah; but, suffering subsequent disappointment, he predicted evil for the king.

³⁵ See especially S. Morenz, “Eilbeute,” *Theologische Zeitschrift* 74 (1949), 697-99, and cf. H. Wildberger, *Jesaja (Biblischer Kommentar)*; Neukirchen, 1972), 313-14.

³⁶ M. Weinfeld, “The Protest Against Imperialism in Ancient Israelite Prophecy,” *The Origins and Diversity of Axial Age Civilizations* (New York, 1986), 169-82,

510-11.

³⁷ R. Borger, *Die Inschriften Asarhaddons*, (AfO Beiheft 9; Graz, 1956), 98, lines 381-386.

³⁸ See my article כּפּוּד in the *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* (G. J. Botterweck and H. Ringgren, eds.)