

“I AM . . . YOUR KING”: ISAIAH’S PORTRAYAL OF YAHWEH
AS THE IDEAL KING

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BT719 Latter Prophets

A paper presented in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in Theological Studies: New Testament

Briercrest Seminary

February 21, 2009

Few other biblical books possess a theology of God as extensive and exalted, or as contrastive to the fallenness of this world, as the prophecies of Isaiah.¹ Yahweh is “Almighty God,” whose limitless knowledge and power puts to shame all other gods. He is the “Holy One of Israel,” whose infallible moral perfection and awesome otherness exalts him above corrupted humanity. Second only to these is Isaiah’s magnificent portrayal of Yahweh as the supreme King, whose perfect and absolute reign mocks the fallible, limited power of human kings, and whose ideals for earthly kingship will only find its perfect realization in the eschatological reign of the Davidic Servant-King. As with the other two descriptions of Yahweh, the theme of kingship runs throughout the sections of Isaiah, now through poetic imagery of his lordship, now by contrasting his kingship with those who claim the title but fall miserably short. Yahweh is the suzerain-king, who holds his people to their covenantal agreement and who calls to account the unfaithfulness of his stewards. He is the warrior-king, who wreaks vengeance upon his enemies and the oppressors of his people, who calls puppet pagan kings to fight his wars, and who will one day conquer all evil and install his reign of peace. And he is the righteous king, who upholds righteousness and justice and who will one day raise up and empower the humble servant-king to be the perfect conduit of his majesty.

Survey: Isaiah’s Ascription of Yahweh as King

Conceptual Background

In order to possess a better understanding of what Yahweh’s kingship means in Isaiah, one must first examine the conceptual framework surrounding his theology. In the ancient Near-East, the boundaries between kingship and divinity were blurred. High gods were ascribed the

¹ John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 1-39* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 32.

qualities of kings, and kings were accorded a divine nature.² The former explains some of the difficulty inherent in making a distinction between Yahweh's divine attributes and his kingly attributes in Isaiah—in fact, they are not to be separated, for Yahweh cannot be Most High God without possessing the authority of a king, and he cannot be King over all creation without possessing the powers of the greatest god.³ The latter can be sensed in the arrogant claims of the king of Babylon, but the kings of Israel were birthed into a different worldview—as vassals in submission to the theocracy of Yahweh and dependent upon his leadership and protection.⁴ But it was this mandate that they had forgotten, provoking the wrath of their Lord.⁵

From the beginning, Israel had pioneered as one of the earliest truly theocratic nations. The covenant detailed in Deuteronomy is now widely recognized as being in the form of a covenant-treaty between a suzerain and his people.⁶ Yahweh freed and led his people and offered to them his unending protection and blessing; in return, they were to give sole allegiance to

² Martin Buber, *Kingship of God* (New Jersey: Humanities Press International, Inc., 1967), 87-89: In both the Egyptian and Babylon-Assyrian empires the king himself is divinized: in Egypt, he is “the embodiment of the miraculous, the superman immune against the fate of life death, the hear of the divine name” and in Babylon he is “the possessor of divine splendour, the earth-bound bearer of the heavenly dignity, a mortal container of the immortal kingly essence.”

³ Ibid., 86, in his study seeks to distinguish between “mere reverence for a lord of heaven on the part of those cultically bound to him” and a god who has an ascertainable “relation between state and sovereign,” though he acknowledges difficulty since the two are so intertwined in the ANE and especially Israel.

⁴ Helena Ann Kenik, “Code of Conduct for a King: Psalm 101,” *JBL* 95/3 (1976): 395: “The king of Judah was not just a political sovereign, nor did he stand for the nation as a god like the king of the ancient orient. He was rather one from among the people of Yahweh who, because of the singular privilege of being anointed to kingship, bore a special responsibility of guardianship for the faith of the nation. His special task was obedience to the voice of Yahweh that demanded of him the practice of justice.”

⁵ James M. Kennedy, “Yahweh's Strongman?” in *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 31:4 (Winter 2004): 383-384: “At a basic thematic level, [Isaiah's] unified testimony involves Israel's ignorance of Yahweh's true status, that status being the unique monarch of the cosmos to whom unalloyed allegiance and singular devotion rightfully belongs.”

⁶ Earl S. Kalland, *Deuteronomy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 4.

Yahweh and agree to and abide by the stipulations contained therein.⁷ Rejection of this treaty and rebellion against their sovereign would result in his destruction of their nation by unleashing the curses contained in the treaty. Yahweh consented to dwell among Israel, enthroned on the golden Ark of the Covenant, fighting their battles, and leading the nation to settle in his land.⁸ When Israel clamored to become a monarchy, God responded to Samuel, “It is not you they have rejected, but they have rejected me as their king” (1 Sam 8:7).⁹ But he established the monarchy as vassalage in submission to his authority as high king:¹⁰

Now here is the king you have chosen, the one you asked for; see, the LORD has set a king over you. If you fear the LORD and serve and obey him and do not rebel against his commands, and if both you and the king who reigns over you follow the LORD your God—good! But if you do not obey the LORD, and if you rebel against his commands, his hand will be against you, as it was against your fathers (1 Sam 12:13-15).¹¹

He soon demonstrates this sovereignty by removing unfaithful Saul from kingship but covenanting with David that his house and throne “will be established forever” (2 Sam 7:16)—a promise of great importance to Isaiah.

⁷ Buber, 150: “Indeed this is ‘not a *baal* of the land’ who clings to spring and soil; He is the accompanying God, the leader of His followers, the *melekh*.” Also 119: “The unconditioned claim of the divine Kingship is recognized at the point when the people proclaims JHWH Himself as King, Him alone and directly (Exodus 15:18), and JHWH Himself enters upon the kingly reign (19:6). He is not content to be ‘God’ in the religious sense.”

⁸ Even this early, Yahweh is ascribed kingship by none other than the pagan prophet, Balaam: “No misfortune is seen in Jacob, no misery observed in Israel. The LORD their God is with them; the shout of the King is among them” (Num 23:21).

⁹ Ronald F. Youngblood, *1 Samuel* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 613, highlights their hidden agenda; “They were looking for a permanent military leader who would build a standing army powerful enough to repulse any invader”; this is the same desire for self-sufficiency and lack of trust in Yahweh’s protection that would plague the kings of Isaiah’s time, and, ironically, reveal their own insufficiency to resist the surrounding powers. Only by Yahweh’s hand will the kingdom stand!

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 610: “from the earliest days it was recognized that ultimately God himself was King (Exod 15:18; Num 23:21; Deut 33:5); he alone possessed absolute power and authority (Exod 15:6, 11; Judg 5:3-5; cf. also Judg 8:22-23). Any king of Israel would have to appreciate from the outset that he was to rule over Israel under God.”

¹¹ Further stipulations for Israel’s kings were given in Deuteronomy 17:14-18:1: they were to appoint the Israelite the LORD chose; he was not to acquire great amounts of horses, wives, or gold that would remove his dependence or steal his allegiance from God; and he was to meditate on the law and “follow carefully all the words of . . . these decrees,” reigning in righteousness and humility. If he and his people were to fail, the LORD would remove him and exile them to a foreign nation (28:36). Isaiah sees this self-dependence in the kings of Judah (2:7), so he can readily apply this threat of exile to them.

It was during the monarchy that Israelite conception of ideal kingship—and, correspondingly, Yahweh as the supreme king—bloomed.¹² Enthronement psalms praising God as King and lauding the Davidic line abounded, and numerous proverbs proscribed ideal kingship.¹³ A recurring theme in both books is found in Psalm 9: “The LORD reigns forever; he has established his throne for judgment. He will judge the world in righteousness; he will govern the peoples with justice. The LORD is a refuge for the oppressed, a stronghold in times of trouble.”¹⁴ Ideal kingship, whether heavenly or earthly, is defined as ruling in *righteousness* and *justice*, in particular caring for the oppressed and the poor.¹⁵ This is a theme that Isaiah will utilize to a great extent in his portrayal of ideal kingship—and the lack thereof.

The Kingship of Yahweh in Isaiah

Isaiah opens with a list of four kings under whose reigns he prophesied: Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah of Judah. These kings covered the spectrum of good and bad examples of kingship, as we shall explore later, but it was Isaiah’s overwhelming encounter with Yahweh himself that had the profoundest influence on him. He “saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted,” with an endless train and heavenly courtiers proclaiming his holiness and majesty

¹² J. J. M. Roberts, “The Enthronement of Yhwh and David: The Abiding Theological Significance of the Kingship Language of the Psalms” in *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 64 (2002): 676.

¹³ Roberts, 676, sums up the tradition behind the enthronement psalms as: “(1) Yahweh is the great king, or suzerain, not only over Israel but over all the nations and their gods; (2) Yahweh has chosen the Davidic house as his human agents for the divine rule and has confirmed that choice with an eternal covenant; and (3) Yahweh has chosen Zion as his royal city, as the earthly dais of his universal rule”; the fact that this could just as easily summarize Isaiah’s theology of kingship as well shows his continuation of this tradition. Ringgren, “Behold Your King Comes,” 210, sees in Isaiah “clear allusion[s] to the enthronement psalms.”

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 680: “In this vision of God’s kingship, the habitable world (Ps 24:1-2) and God’s throne itself rest upon the subdued waters of chaos (Pss 29:10; 93:1-4). The framework that supports and upholds this secure world and God’s throne against the ever-present threat of a return to chaos is ‘righteousness and justice’ (Ps 97:2).”

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 683: “the royal ideal rooted the king’s participation in the divine rule in the same divine justice and righteousness that were the foundation of Yahweh’s throne. . . . One of the king’s primary roles, according to this ideal, was, like God, to deliver the poor and oppressed from the hand of the powerful oppressor.”

(6:1).¹⁶ His response to this vision was terror: “‘Woe to me!’ I cried. ‘I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty’” (6:5). The rest of his book fleshes out what this King is like.

Yahweh is portrayed as possessing a kingly majesty that inspires either paralyzing dread or joyous praise, depending on the state of one’s allegiance to him.¹⁷ He will be a “glorious crown” for his remnant (27:5), and the splendor he possesses he can bestow upon others at will.¹⁸ “Heaven is [his] throne, and earth is [his] footstool” (66:1)¹⁹—he is not a localized deity like most ANE gods, but his authority stretches “over all the kingdoms of the earth (37:16).²⁰ He rules in judgment with a royal scepter (30:31), and all foreign nations will one day “swear allegiance to the LORD Almighty” (19:18). Interestingly, Motyer even terms Isaiah 1-37 “The Book of the King” who reigns in Zion, and one finds rich metaphors here of Yahweh as Warrior-King.²¹ However, it is only in “The Book of the Servant” (chs 38-55) that one finds direct titles of Yahweh as king: “Jacob’s King” (41:21) and “Israel’s King and Redeemer” (44:6); and even a self-attestation: “I am the LORD, your Holy One, Israel’s Creator, your King” (43:15). Apart

¹⁶ J. Alec Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 1993), 37: “In what turns out to be an apt symbol of David’s house itself, King Uzziah is dying (6:1; cf. 2 Ki. 15:5; 2 Ch. 26:16-18). But alongside the dying, defiled king there is the Holy One, ‘the King, the LORD Almighty [of hosts]’ (6:5). The interplay of these two kingships—the holy, divine King and the terminally-ill Davdic house—and their envisaged merger in a divine King of David’s line (7:14; 9:6-7; 11:1, 10) becomes the unifying theme.”

¹⁷ Cf. 2:10, 19, 21; 8:13; 24:14; 26:10.

¹⁸ Cf. 35:2; 46:13; 49:3; 63:1.

¹⁹ Cf. 37:16; 40:22; 63:15 for other metaphors of enthronement.

²⁰ Roberts, 680: the enthronement psalms emphasize that “Yahweh’s imperial rule is rooted in creation; it is anterior to and, therefore, not dependent on Israel, the Davidic monarchy, or the fate of Jerusalem. God’s authority over the other nations arises out the fact that he created the whole world, including these nations, not out of Israel’s historical conquest of them.”

²¹ Motyer, 37: “A single theme binds the first thirty-seven chapters of Isaiah: the king who reigns in Zion. It is a complex theme, full of tensions. Sometimes the king is the Lord himself (6:1, 5), sometimes he is the current king of the house of David (7:1-2) and sometimes he is the king who is yet to come (9:6-7). On the whole, however, the future dominates the present, yet even here the tension continues, for at one time the vision is of the Lord’s coming reign (24:33) and at another it is of a king born in David’s line (11:1, 10).

from the enthronement psalms, these appear to be some of the earliest direct uses of the title “king” (*melekh*) for Yahweh.²²

Yahweh is also described as a mighty warrior-king, wreaking vengeance upon his foes and conquering evil to cleanse the world for his reign of peace. “The LORD will march out like a mighty man, like a warrior he will stir up his zeal; with a shout he will raise the battle cry and will triumph over his enemies” (42:12-13).²³ In fact, “Mighty One” is another favorite Isaianic term for Yahweh.²⁴ Because Israel has “so greatly revolted against” (31:6) their suzerain, he will come against them and lay waste their land. They have not been faithful stewards of his land, nor have they protected the weakest of his citizens; so he will retake his own and ensure that justice will be meted out.²⁵ He “[musters] an army for war” from the ends of the earth” (13:4-5), and none shall escape. But his vengeance is not limited to Israel: all evil empires and arrogant kings—even those who unknowingly serve his purpose—will face his wrath. As high king, Yahweh primarily uses underling human kings to wage his wars, but he is not limited to them: he alone decimated the unstoppable Assyrian force overnight (37:36)! He will bring down all who are proud and arrogant and remove supports from the self-reliant, in order that “the LORD alone will be exalted in that day” (2:11, 5:15-16).

²² Later prophets, such as Jeremiah, Zephaniah, Zechariah, and Malachi, perhaps following Isaiah’s lead, will also refer to Yahweh as “King.”

²³ Buber, 142: “JHWH is not, as is frequently understood, a war-god; nor a covenant-god developed into a war-god. War-gods help their fighting peoples. They do not, with human and super-human armies, wage their own wars. . . . The protector-god wages the war of his protégés; the *melekh* JHWH wages His own war. When Deborah says to Barak (Judges 4:14): ‘Does not JHWH go before you?’ she speaks not to the devotee of a cult-numen, but to a follower of a divine duke.” 145: “He *is* not a ‘man of war’ (Exodus 15:3); He *becomes* one when it is necessary.”

²⁴ Cf. 1:24; 10:13, 34; 33:21; 49:26; 60:16.

²⁵ 3:14-15: “The LORD enters into judgment against the elders and leaders of *his* people: ‘It is you who have ruined *my* vineyard; the plunder from the poor is in your houses. What do you mean by crushing *my* people and grinding the faces of the poor?’ declares the Lord, the LORD Almighty” (italics mine).

But Yahweh is not a god-king with low self-esteem, lashing out at all who fail to give him his due allegiance. His purpose for war is to ensure that *justice* and *righteousness* are available for all who are oppressed and without hope.²⁶ These attributes are inextricably linked, and form his very heartbeat: “For I, the LORD, love justice” (61:8); “My righteousness draws near speedily, my salvation is on the way, and my arm will bring justice to the nations.” (51:5). But social injustice provokes his great wrath: “And he looked for justice, but saw bloodshed; for righteousness, but heard cries of distress. Woe to you”! (5:7-8). While his reign will bring terror and annihilation to those who promote evil upon the earth, his coming is looked to with desperate longing and received with joy by the oppressed and all who reflect their Lord’s heart (29:17). Like ANE kings, he is the dispenser of justice: “For the LORD is our judge, the LORD is our lawgiver, the LORD is our king; it is he who will save us” (33:22); “When they cry out to the LORD because of their oppressors, he will send them a savior and defender, and he will rescue them” (19:20).²⁷ And like the mythological power associated with ANE kings, he is a healer (both spiritually and physically),²⁸ and he bestows favor and reward upon his faithful servants (40:10-11).

Contrast: The Failure of Human Kings

But Isaiah is not content to merely describe the kingliness of Yahweh; like his other descriptions, he presents a foil by showing the extent humanity falls short of Yahweh’s perfection as the ideal King. Many kings in Isaiah are diametrically opposed to Yahweh and his

²⁶ Cf. 1:27; 5:16; 28:6, 17; 30:18; 33:5; 51:5; 61:8—the terms are often used in parallelism or together as a hendiadys [Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 1-39* (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 108].

²⁷ This passage ironically refers to Egypt—Israel’s traditional enemy! While his focus is upon Israel, no nation is outside of his cleansing and saving grace.

²⁸ Ringgren, “Behold Your King Comes,” 210; cf. Isaiah 6:10; 19:22; 30:26; 38:16; 57:18, 19; 58:8.

heart, yet he can use them to serve his purposes.²⁹ After Yahweh uses Assyria as the “rod of [his] anger” to punish unfaithful Israel, he will turn on Assyria for thinking that it was by their strength they were successful:

I will punish the king of Assyria for the willful pride of his heart and the haughty look in his eyes. For he says: ‘By the strength of my hand I have done this, and by my wisdom, because I have understanding. I removed the boundaries of nations, I plundered their treasures; like a mighty one I subdued their kings.’ . . . Does the ax raise itself above him who swings it, or the saw boast against him who uses it? (10:12-15).

The king of Babylon, in particular, claims some sort of divine status:

You said in your heart, "I will ascend to heaven; I will raise my throne above the stars of God; I will sit enthroned on the mount of assembly, on the utmost heights of the sacred mountain. I will ascend above the tops of the clouds; I will make myself like the Most High (14:13-14).³⁰

But like all great kings, he too will be brought to the grave, a weakened ghost joining those he conquered, his pomp rotting and his power evaporated (14:3-23). The Assyrian field commander, bloated by his string of victories, “ridicule[d] the living God” and Hezekiah’s hope for deliverance (36; 37:4). Even after being forced to temporarily withdraw, Sennacherib reminded Hezekiah that no other foreign god or king had withstood him (37:12-13). Yahweh responds, “Who is it you have insulted and blasphemed? Against whom have you raised your voice and lifted your eyes in pride? Against the Holy One of Israel!” (37:23-24). Such arrogance was fatal, and his army was decimated overnight.³¹ Though most pagan kings were, like these, arrogant and cruel, Yahweh the King could manipulate them not only to destroy, but also to rebuild. Isaiah

²⁹ Roberts, 681: “since Yahweh was suzerain over all the nations, God could summon any nation to serve as a tool for punishing any other nation, even if the object of the punishment were his very own people. This behavior of God was so unexpected by the popular piety of God’s own people that Isaiah characterizes it as God’s ‘foreign work’ and ‘alien action’ (Isa 28:21).”

³⁰ This accords well with Buber’s description of the Babylonian understanding of the king as divine (also see Blenkinsopp, 288; Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 1-39*, 322).

³¹ Christopher R. Seitz, *Isaiah 1-39* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1989), 252: “The city will be defended for the sake of God’s own honor, which was called into question. . . . Sennacherib and the reader learn ‘A blasphemer is nowhere safe from the power of the omnipotent God’.”

predicts that God will summon the Persian king Cyrus, who does not even acknowledge Yahweh, to “rebuild my city and set my exiles free” (45:5, 13).³² Where arrogant humans fail, Yahweh’s will always succeeds.

The kings of Judah, while descended from the nearly ideal king-under-Yahweh, David, ultimately fail to fulfill their mandates.³³ Ahaz, a notoriously wicked and syncretistic king (2 Kings 16), demonstrates a false piety by refusing Isaiah’s offer to request a sign confirming Yahweh’s gracious promise of protection (7:12).³⁴ This tries the patience of God, who pronounces the eventual destruction of Israel by Assyria (7:20).

Uzziah, Jotham, and Hezekiah are affirmed as good kings in the annals, but each failed to halt the flood of syncretism in their land. While temple worship to Yahweh was encouraged, vigorously by Hezekiah (2 Chron 29-31), idolatry remained a massive problem in Isaiah’s time, and much of his invectives are aimed at the absurdity of relying on statues when they have been given the LORD Almighty himself! They also refused to trust in Yahweh’s protection, as each sought to fortify his defenses and build up his armies against the threat of military conquest (Isa 22:8-11; 2 Chron 26-27, 32). And they further betrayed their allegiance to Yahweh by seeking alliances with pagan nations (30:1ff).³⁵ Hezekiah’s friendship with the Babylonian envoys is especially grievous, since his earlier faith in God’s protection was so astoundingly rewarded with

³² John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 40-66* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 202: “If it is true that God is not limited in his choice of historical instruments for the achieving of his purposes, it is also true that this breathtaking freedom never abrogates his ancient promises.”

³³ Perhaps this contrast is one of the primary reasons Isaiah included the narrative accounts in his book, and in particular chose these stories detailing the actions of pagan and Israelite kings and Yahweh’s kingly power?

³⁴ Motyer, 83: “To refuse a proffered sign is proof that one does not want to believe.”

³⁵ Blenkinsopp, 412: “The prophet’s denunciation of making alliances, which is what one expects responsible governments to do, was inspired by a kind of political quietism based on uncompromising and absolute trust in the protection of Yahweh.”

God's direct intervention.³⁶ When confronted, he displayed his inherent self-centeredness in his relief that the horrific consequences would not fall in his time (39:8).³⁷

And they were ultimately unfaithful shepherds of the sheep Yahweh entrusted to their care, as social injustice had reached a high water mark during Isaiah's ministry.³⁸ He includes nameless judges, rulers, and elders in his oracles against social injustice, condemning bribery, favoritism, oppression, and leading the people astray (chs. 1-5). Justice and righteousness were far from Israel—corruption had infiltrated every level of government.³⁹ Though kings like Hezekiah had attempted reforms, they were not enough to stem the tide. Soon Judah's kings would become so wicked that the nation would be exiled and the monarchy would cease to exist. How, then, would Yahweh remain true to his promises for the eternal kingship of the Davidic line? How would he be able to instill his perfect reign of kingship on the earth when humanity was so broken and would forever fail? Isaiah has an astonishing answer.

³⁶ While that extent of Hezekiah's action is to be read as a formal alliance with Babylon is debatable (Motyer, 296, sees one), it does show a depth of unhealthy self-pride [so Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 1-39* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 311]. Kennedy, 396, also makes an interesting point: "Hezekiah's display of wealth, furthermore, evokes the book's accusations that such wealth is the result of the extortion of defenseless people. . . . Might not a reader expect Hezekiah to boast in Yahweh instead of his wealth in land and houses? Might not the reader take the very possession of such wealth—culled from the outrages of social injustice that provoked Yahweh's anger—as calling into question the king's loyalty to Yahweh as the book of Isaiah configures loyalty?"

³⁷ Kennedy in "Yahweh's Strongman?" details some of the scholarly disagreements surrounding Isaiah's intended portrayal of Hezekiah as a "prototype of godliness," a "good [king] who made a momentary slip of judgment," or as "ultimately disappointing any hopes about an ideal Davidic king." Motyer's perspective is perhaps the most accurate, describing Hezekiah as "'one of the most truly human of the kings. . . . whose heart was genuinely moved towards the Lord but whose will was fickle' in the moment of trial. In his view, Hezekiah finally fails his responsibilities as a servant of Yahweh because of pride born from a sense of royal accomplishment" (Kennedy, 387, quoting Motyer, 290).

³⁸ Roberts, "The Enthronement of Yhwh and David," 681: Righteousness and justice hold back the subdued waters of chaos, so when nations ignore them and "allow the wicked to oppress the poor, it is not just human society that suffers; in deed, the very structure of reality is threatened. . . . An Israel that perverted justice and oppressed the poor was just as much a threat to the stability of the created order as any other sinful nation; and thus Israel was just as much a potential object of divine judgment as any other nation."

³⁹ Roberts, 683; Kennedy, 393: "the text portrays Isaiah as Yahweh's emissary who confronts the Judahite monarchy and the bureaucracy that supports it with the warning that Yahweh, Isaiah's master, is coming. If human beings—indeed, God's own people—will not heed Yahweh's demands, the Yahweh will impose them."

Solution: The Promise of the Servant-King

For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever (9:6-7).

Herein lies the mystery: a human of the Davidic line will be born, and he will take up David's throne, ruling as God intended for the monarchy in "justice and righteousness" for eternity—just as Yahweh promised.⁴⁰ But unlike his predecessors, there is in him a mysterious union of the human and divine: he is also "Mighty God" and the "Root of Jesse" (11:10)! Somehow in this man the fallible nature of human kings will be permanently overcome.⁴¹ On him the spirit of the LORD will rest, empowering him with wisdom (11:1-4) and equipping him to "bring justice to the nations" (42:1-4).⁴² Unlike his predecessors he will wholly "delight in the fear of the LORD" (11:3) and live according to his heart, putting wrongs to right. Instead of selfishness and arrogance he has total Yahweh-orientation and a surprising humility (42:1-2). Instead of self-indulgence at the expense of the poor, he shares in their oppression and suffering and heals them (53:1ff).⁴³ Instead of being responsible for the devastation of creation, his righteous reign

⁴⁰ Cf. 16:5 "In love a throne will be established; in faithfulness a man will sit on it—one from the house of David—one who in judging seeks justice and speeds the cause of righteousness"; 11:4-5: "but with righteousness he will judge the needy, with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth. . . . Righteousness will be his belt and faithfulness the sash around his waist"; 32:1, 16: "See, a king will reign in righteousness and rulers will rule with justice. . . . Justice will dwell in the desert and righteousness live in the fertile field"; 42:3-4: "In faithfulness he will bring forth justice; he will not falter or be discouraged till he establishes justice on earth."

⁴¹ Roberts, 683.

⁴² Kenik, "Code of Conduct for a King," 399, observes in Proverbs 1-9 the importance of divine wisdom in the conduct expected of the king: "it challenged him to identify with the ways of the Lord, to live in fear of Yahweh." This creates a link with Isaiah's emphasis that the servant-king will be inspired by the spirit of wisdom—he is the fulfillment of ideal kingship as portrayed in Israel's wisdom literature.

⁴³ Helmer Ringgren, "Behold Your King Comes" in *Vetus Testamentum* 24:2 (April 1974): 210: "it should not be forgotten that the healing of blind and deaf and lame (35:5f) is a motif that is traditionally bound up with the accession of a new king in the Ancient Near East."

restores it.⁴⁴ He is the despised servant to whom kings will bow, the hope of the furthest nations, Israel's new covenant,⁴⁵ and the Prince of peace, ruling over Yahweh's earth-wide dominion from his throne in Zion.⁴⁶ Through him, Yahweh's ideal kingship is most gloriously revealed.⁴⁷

Until the advent of this perfect servant-king, human kings will still fail, causing misery and injustice. But Yahweh remains the supreme and universal King, and all earthly powers are tools in his hand to accomplish his purposes—purposes that no one can thwart (46:8-13). He will destroy all wickedness, bring his enemies into submission, and establish a kingdom of peace, justice and righteousness that will last for eternity. But as Oswalt put it so aptly, “his greatness is not merely in his power, it is also in his ability to stoop. Conquerors cannot bend down to the lowly; the God of eternity is mighty enough to do so.”⁴⁸ Yahweh himself says, “I live in a high and holy place, but also with him who is contrite and lowly in spirit” (57:15). This is a King who is merciful, compassionate, and eager to redeem his rebellious and broken people at greatest cost to himself and his perfect Servant (53:10). Truly, he is *the* ideal king.

⁴⁴ Roberts, 681: “as the prophets point out, human injustice, whether Israelite or foreign, causes all of creation to suffer and threatens to return it to a state of primeval chaos. That is why all of creation rejoices at the announcement that God is coming to judge the world and the nations in righteousness; it is the divine king's maintenance of justice and righteousness that allows not only humans but the living things of the sea and the field and all the trees of the forest to thrive. Thus, far from relating God only to the human world, the Psalms' [and Isaiah's] portrayal of the kingship of God embraces all of creation.”

⁴⁵ Buber, 92: “the ‘servant’ himself is viewed as ‘people's covenant’, as the very man, through whom the steams of covenant fulfillment move from above downward, from below upward, who must become the living symbol of the covenant.”

⁴⁶ Cf. ch. 11; 32:18; 42:1-7; 49:6, 8. Kenik, “Code of Conduct for a King,” 393, notes that the “essential theme of [Psalm 101 is] peace and order among the people living in the ‘city of Yahweh,’ made possible by the practice of justice”; this idealized hope becomes reality under the reign of the servant-king.

⁴⁷ Though it is interesting that Isaiah 56-66 makes fewer direct references to either Yahweh as king or the servant king (apart from ch. 61): Zionism, rather, is the focus. Roberts, 684: “God's promises to the Davidic king were democratized and applied to the people as a whole (Isa 55:3). . . . the king is taken as a model for every individual, and what was once predicated of the king is now applied more generally” both here and in some psalms.

⁴⁸ Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 1-39*, 32, citing 9:6; 11:1-9; 40:10-11; 57:14-15.

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