

Fun in the Pun in Deciphering Isaiah¹⁾

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1. Introduction

During the previous semester, I taught—and learned—the Psalms; it was my third time offering this course. Through this experience, I have found out one of the recent scholarly trends in Psalms studies, i.e., discovering and making sense of the sequences and correlations of various parts in the entirety of the Psalms.²⁾ This seems very similar to the current trend in Isaiah scholarship and of the Twelve prophets, if not even of the Pentateuch or the Enneateuch.³⁾ Admittedly, it can be quite

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- 2) Gerald H. Wilson, *The Editing of the Hebrew Psalter*, SBLDS 76 (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1985); Nancy L. deClaissé-Walford, *Introduction to the Psalms: A Song from Ancient Israel* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2004); Idem, ed., *The Shape and Shaping of the Book of Psalms: The Current State of Scholarship* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2014).
- 3) Thomas Dozeman, Thomas Römer, and Konrad Schmid, eds., *Pentateuch, Hexateuch, or Enneateuch?: Identifying Literary Works in Genesis through Kings*, SBLAIL 8 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2011); Jan C. Gertz et al., eds., *The Formation of the Pentateuch: Bridging the Academic Cultures of Europe, Israel and North*

futile to assume that every linkage or placement was meant to be neatly correlated within the unified whole. Many of these signposts or markers may be coincidental, their recurring connections mere happenstance. Nevertheless, it seems reasonable to consider that whoever put these compositions together may have collected and arranged various parts by way of certain logical sequences—be they roughly chronological, thematic, linguistic, theological, and so on.

The present study is the result of observing and examining the parts in question with the contention that the final form invites readers to follow the sequences, transitions, and even surprising twists of motifs, as if readers were to treasure-hunt through both explicit and hidden puns (“paronomasia”) and eventually intended messages. What intrigues me about recent Psalms scholarship is not so much connecting various psalms together, but rather discovering certain key words, phrases, or signposts so as to find their recurrences and interconnections from seemingly unrelated psalms.⁴⁾ This is quite similar in the book of Isaiah where many parts, if not all, are joined by redactional genius, more often than not, (1) purposefully intended for readers (2) to follow key signposts and puns, and (3) to make both correlated meanings and reconceptualized implications simultaneously.

The primary aims I am proposing, therefore, are making observations of those key puns, word plays, and catchphrases. Why puns?⁵⁾ Puns can be fun but often serve a deeper function.

America, FAT 111 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2016).

4) For example, the same word (טעמ) in Psalm 34 makes a pun in two seemingly opposite connotations occurring in Ps 34:1 (“he disguised as insane”) and in Ps 34:9 (“taste” [Eng. 34:8]).

5) Merriam-Webster’s Dictionary defines “pun” as “the usually humorous use of a word in such a way as to suggest two or more of its meanings or the meaning of another word similar in sound.” For recent biblical studies on literary puns, see Scott B. Noegel, ed., *Puns and Pundits: Word Play in the Hebrew Bible and*

Puns draw readers to powerful insights, hidden critiques, and surprising implications. They may function like secret codes, which only those who uncover them may be able to understand and appreciate. They may also function like a famous piece of music or art, which leads the audience to both the familiar and that which is new or renewed in the moments of re-listening, re-observing, and re-reading.

2. Cases of Puns in Isaiah

2.1. The “desert of the sea” and the “valley of vision” in the OAN

In the so-called OAN (Oracle Against Nations) section (chs. 13–23), commentators find the phrase “wilderness of the sea” (21:1, *מדבר-ים*) puzzling to decipher and difficult to identify.⁶ In fact, the phrase itself is paradoxical: desert (dry) and sea (watery) do not cohere except to denote opposition, just like “joy of sorrow” or “peace of war” would not make much sense. It might function as a hendiadys, meaning “an ocean-like wilderness,” but, even so, it does not clarify much.

This obscure and paradoxical phrase may signify several intriguing and important issues. First of all, as commentators have noted, this phrase (*משא מדבר-ים*, 21:1) has a similar function to “the oracle concerning the valley of vision” (*משא גיא חזיון*) in 22:1. Most likely, both phrases may have been derived from their own texts (e.g., 22:5). Even so, the syntactical ironies correlating both phrases, i.e., “wilderness by the sea”

Ancient Near Eastern Literature (Bethesda, MD: CDL Press, 2000).

6) Unless noted otherwise, all biblical translations are from the NRSV. Also, all scripture references are from the book of Isaiah, except those added with the names of other books.

and “valley of vision,” consistently present symbolic meanings. Symbolically or metaphorically, they function as puns, connoting the wilderness that seems as menacing or chaotic as the sea (Yamm) and the vastness of the valley that makes any vision impossible.⁷⁾ Furthermore, this pun may echo the exodus tradition where the forces of the sea and the journeys of the wilderness might be intertwined. In this sense, the oracle may even anticipate the new exodus which has yet to deal with both the sea and the wilderness (cf. Isaiah 40).

Second, Joseph Blenkinsopp renders this phrase “the wasteland by the sea,” alluding to the “marshy delta of the Tigris and Euphrates in southern Mesopotamia.”⁸⁾ Its inference to Babylon then makes good sense especially in coinciding with 21:9: “Fallen, fallen is Babylon; and all the images of her gods lie shattered on the ground.” Just as the former place of vision, i.e., the Jerusalem temple (6:1), ironically becomes a valley of no vision (22:1; cf. Ezek 37:1-2), so the wilderness and the sea now allude to Babylon. The double expression, “fallen, fallen is Babylon,” mirrors the similar expression, “comfort, comfort my people” in 40:1, as though portraying two sides of the same coin.⁹⁾

Third, though not verbatim, this phrase occurs in another

7) John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 1-39*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 409: “Again and again, Jerusalem is referred to as Mount Zion. But here Isaiah says Jerusalem is not a mountain from which a long view is possible, but a valley from which nothing can be seen.” Scholars associate the valley in Isa 22:1 with the valleys of Rephaim (Josh 15:8) and Hinnom (also called Topheth; 2 Kings 23:10; Jer 7:31-32) around Jerusalem.

8) Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 1-39*, AB 19 (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 323-24; also John D. W. Watts, *Isaiah 1-33*, rev. ed., WBC (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2005), 332: “the wasteland”; Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 1-39*, 391: “the Sealand” (referring to southern Mesopotamia).

9) Hyun Chul Paul Kim, *Reading Isaiah: A Literary and Theological Commentary* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2016), 103.

OAN unit in the oracle on Moab (chs. 15–16). The pertinent phrase is a part of the lament over the downfall of Moab: “For the fields of Heshbon have withered, the vines of Sibmah as well; The lords of the nations have trampled down its choice clusters Which reached as far as Jazer and wandered to the deserts (מִדְבָּר); Its tendrils spread themselves out and passed over the sea (יָם)” (16:8, NASB). The pairing of these words in this expression may be a mere coincidence.¹⁰⁾ Yet, compared to Jer 48:32 where the word “desert” is missing, it is noteworthy that here we find the two words in parallel.¹¹⁾ Many commentators skip over this verse in their expositions. So we are left to ponder this pun. If the editor had these same words in mind, then readers are to make sense of the interconnected allusions. Thus, the personification of Moab’s fields and vines is all the more intriguing. They once strayed all the way into the wilderness and even “crossed over” the sea, evoking the exodus motif. At the same time, the terminology may also compare Moab’s political fate with that of Israel at the hands of Babylon.¹²⁾

Fourth, both “wilderness” and “sea” (21:1), together with “valley” and “vision” (22:1), may establish further puns through the inner-biblical allusions in Isa 40:1-11, the so-called divine council passage. The divine call, “in the wilderness (בְּמִדְבָּר) prepare the way of the Lord” (40:3a), resounds the similar metaphor of the dry, parched territory of the wilderness, as if symbolizing the exilic land of Babylon in southern Mesopotamia. If the wilderness of exile (21:1) would be transformed into a

10) Elsewhere in Isaiah, the combination of these two words can be found in Isa 50:2.

11) Blenkinsopp considers Jeremiah text to be a *Vorlage* of Isaiah text.

12) Terence E. Fretheim, *Jeremiah* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2002), 595: “The Moabites suffered at Babylonian hands not least because they joined Israel in rebellion against the Babylonians (27:1-11; 595 BC; Josephus mentions that Moab was conquered in 582 BC).”

highway (40:3), the “valley” (22:1) of Jerusalem would be transformed likewise: “every valley shall be lifted up” (כָּל-גִּיּוֹת יִנָּשָׂא, 40:4). What will happen once the steep valley is lifted up? The vision of the divine is once more possible: “then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together” (40:5). Moreover, the personified Jerusalem is recalled from their aimless wandering in the low valley and instead get up “to a high mountain” to announce Yhwh’s victorious return (40:9; cf. 52:7). In the preceding command to “speak (דַּבֵּר) to the heart of Jerusalem” (40:2, my translation), readers might discover the hints of a pun between the two words with different meanings but similar pronunciation, i.e., speak (דַּבֵּר) and wilderness (מִדְבָּר). How can these radical transformations of the wilderness occur? The answer may lie in the very root-word of “wilderness,” i.e., by the divine speech/command: “for the mouth of the Lord has spoken (דַּבֵּר)”(40:5).

Fifth, the valley’s transformation in 40:4 (“every valley shall be lifted up [נִשָּׂא], and every mountain and hill be made low [שִׁפְּלוּ]”) further echoes Yhwh’s plan to uplift the down-trodden while crushing the arrogant in 2:12 (“For the Lord of hosts will have a day of reckoning ... against everyone who is lifted up [נִשָּׂא], That he may be abased [שִׁפְּלוּ]”; NASB). This radical reversal of fortunes between the highs (the proud, haughty leaders) and the lows (the humble, contrite servants of Yhwh; cf. 57:15; 66:2) is one of the key thematic threads of the book of Isaiah.¹³⁾ Notably, Isa 22:1 also hints at this theme: “what is it that all of you [second person feminine, but in plural syntax] have all gone up (עָלִיתֶם) to the rooftops” (my translation). Whereas Yhwh will elevate Eliakim, “my servant,” with high honor

13) Hyun Chul Paul Kim, “Little Highs, Little Lows: Tracing Key Themes in Isaiah,” in *The Book of Isaiah: Enduring Questions Answered Anew: Essays Honoring Joseph Blenkinsopp and His Contribution to the Study of Isaiah*, ed. Richard J. Bauckham and J. Todd Hibbard (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 141-66.

(22:20-24), Shebna the proud royal leader will be taken down from the height (22:15-19). Similarly, the proud nobles of Jerusalem will be humiliated (22:1-8a), unlike YHWH's servant who will be "exalted (יָרוּם) and lifted up (נִשָּׂא)" (52:13). Additionally, the "valley" in 40:4 parallels the "the uneven ground" (עֵקֶב) which will "become level" (בִּישׁוּר). The "uneven ground" (עֵקֶב=*āqōb*) in Hebrew contains its pun with the name "Jacob" (יַעֲקֹב=*ya'āqōb*), connoting the subsurface theme that "*Jacob* will become upright [i.e., no longer crooked]."¹⁴ The prophetic exhortation in 2:5 nicely coheres with this theme: "O house of *Jacob*, come, let us [uprightly] walk in the light of the Lord!"

2.2. Cyrus the Messiah

Although there is no OAN section in the strict sense in Isaiah 40–66, interpreters have considered chs. 46–48 as somewhat equivalent to the OAN (see also ch. 63). Here, following the divine commissioning of Cyrus as YHWH's own shepherd and messiah (44:28; 45:1) for the tasks of rebuilding Jerusalem and releasing the captives (45:13), we hear the descriptions of the Babylonian defeat and humiliation. The initial statement portrays it clearly: "Bel bows down and Nebo stoops (קָרַס), their images are upon beasts and cattle; the things that you lift up (נִשְׂאֲתִיכֶם) are loaded as burdens (נִשָּׂא) on weak animals" (46:1-2, my translation). An intriguing pun is hidden in one of the verbs that portray these Babylonian deities. The

14) Iskandar Abou-Chaar, "Rereading Isaiah 40–55 as 'Project Launcher' for the Books of the Law and the Prophets," in *Festschrift in Honor of Professor Paul Nadim Tarazi: Vol. 1, Studies in the Old Testament*, ed. N. Roddy (New York: Lang, 2013), 121: "The problem posed in Isaiah 40–49, for which answer is given in Isaiah 50–55, is precisely how to make of Jacob an upright person!"

verb for Nebo to “stoop, bend down” (סָקַר=*qōrēs*) sounds exactly the same as the name Cyrus (כּוֹרֵשׁ=*kôrēs*). Admittedly, with this text’s close proximity to the preceding texts, it makes sense that Cyrus is hinted at. What then are the function and implications of this pun? The pun adds the fun in reading and interpreting.

On the one hand, in light of the historical setting, it is apparent that the verb recalls the great Persian king and Judah’s liberator, King Cyrus, who would literally “bend down” the Babylonian rulers and forces. Cyrus is the one who conquers and “subdues” the Babylonian empire. Even the word “burden” (נִשְׂאָה) in 46:1-2, which occurs rather uniquely here in Isaiah 40–66, may echo the OAN sections of Isaiah 1-39. Just as in chs. 13–23, the oracles against Babylon in its core portion may form a primary inclusio, as both an introduction (ch. 13) and a conclusion (ch. 21; cf. 23:13); so here in chs. 46–48 Babylon’s subjugation and downfall mark the primary object of the oracle.¹⁵⁾ Cyrus conquers Bel and Babylon, as well as Nebo and Nebuchadnezzar.¹⁶⁾

15) Chris Franke, “Reversals of Fortune in the Ancient Near East: A Study of the Babylon Oracles in the Book of Isaiah,” in *New Visions of Isaiah*, ed. Roy F. Melugin and Marvin A. Sweeney, JSOTSup 214 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), 104-23. See also Hyun Chul Paul Kim, “Isaiah 22: A Crux or a Clue in Isaiah 13-23?” in *Concerning the Nations: Essays on the Oracles against the Nations in Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel*, ed. Else K. Holt, Hyun Chul Paul Kim, and Andrew Mein, LHBOTS 612 (London: T&T Clark, 2015), 3-18.

16) William W. Hallo and K. Lawson Younger, *Context of Scripture* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), II:315: “I am Cyrus, king of the world, great king, mighty king, king of Babylon, king of Sumer and Akkad, king of the four quarters, ... king of Anshan, (of an) eternal line of kingship, whose rule Bel (i.e., Marduk) and Nabu love, whose kingship they desire for their hearts’ pleasure.” Note also Chris Franke, *Isaiah 46, 47, and 48: A New Literary-Critical Reading* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1994), 26: “Bel is the title for the god Marduk (Hebrew ‘Merodach’), protector of Babylon. Bel-Marduk was the Mesopotamian counterpart of Baal

On the other hand, it is still interesting, or puzzling, that the name Cyrus connects to the verb depicting the downfall of Babylonian deities, as opposed to uplifting or saving the Judeans. It is like the effect of hearing the character's last name in the comedic movie, "Meet the Fockers." The inherent pun in this movie name is as undeniable as the pun alluding to the eventual fate of the great Persian ruler! In light of the preceding texts and the recent historiographical and socio-postcolonial studies on the Persian period, it is my contention that these texts do not elevate Cyrus himself, either.¹⁷⁾ His name is used to denote "stooping down, bending down" (46:1-2), a decidedly stark contrast to the servant of YHWH, "See, my servant shall prosper; he shall be exalted and lifted up, and shall be very high" (52:13; cf. 6:1)—note the irony that a servant/slave is not supposed to be lifted up or be very high/highly exalted. This runs counter to the rather positive portrayal of Cyrus in Isaiah 44–45. However, this reading is consistent with the emphatic message that "I surname you, though you *do not know* me ... I arm you, though you *do not know* me" (45:4-5), which echoes back to the asinine and obdurate people of Judah (6:9).

According to the Cyrus Cylinder, the divine election and

(Hadad). His image, and the image of his son, Nebo ... were carried in a spring New Year festival procession in Babylon."

- 17) Amélie Kuhrt, "The Cyrus Cylinder and Achaemenid Imperial Policy," *JSOT* 25 (1983), 83-97; dem, "Ancient Near Eastern History: The Case of Cyrus the Great of Persia," in *Understanding the History of Ancient Israel*, ed. H. G. M. Williamson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 107-27; Reinhard G. Kratz, "From Nabonidus to Cyrus," in *Melammu Symposia III: Milano 2002*, ed. A. Panaino and G. Pettinato (Milan: Università di Bologna & Isiao, 2003), 143-56; David Vanderhoof, "Cyrus II, Liberator or Conqueror?: Ancient Historiography concerning Cyrus in Babylon," in *Judah and the Judeans in the Persian Period*, ed. Oded Lipschits and Mandred Oeming (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2006), 351-72.

victory conferred upon Cyrus is credited to Marduk. It seems evident that Deutero-Isaiah is making a polemic, like a parody, not only on the ignorance of Cyrus but also on the impotence of Marduk. The linguistic parallels and similar expressions make this case all the more plausible, thereby highlighting Deutero-Isaiah's ultimate agenda, i.e., YHWH alone is the true Creator God, not Cyrus or Marduk:

He surveyed and looked throughout all the lands, searching for a righteous king whom he would support. He called out his name: Cyrus, king of Anshan;... He ordered him to march to his city Babylon... From [Ninev]eh (?), Ashur and Susa, Agade, Eshnunna, Zamban, Meturnu, Der, as far as the region of Gutium, I returned the (images of) the gods to the sacred centers [on the other side of] the Tigris whose sanctuaries had been abandoned for a long time, and I let them dwell in eternal abodes. I gathered all their inhabitants and returned (to them) their dwellings.¹⁸⁾

Concerning the words, “do not know” and “anointing” (45:1, 4-5), some other texts might be related by these puns. The first case is the beginning chapter of the book of Isaiah: “Ah, sinful nation, people laden with iniquity, offspring who do evil, children who deal corruptly (בְּנֵיִם מִשְׁחִיתִים), who have forsaken the Lord, who have despised the Holy One of Israel, who are utterly estranged (נִזְרוּ אַחֲזֹר)!” (1:4). Certainly, the word associated with “anointing” cannot be found here. However, in describing the “children [literally, ‘sons’] who act corruptly” amid these name callings, the word “act corruptly” (root: שָׁחַת) has initial letters (מִשְׁחִיתִים) that look like and even sound like the word “to anoint” (מִשָּׁח).¹⁹⁾ Could it be that these sons were in one sense meant to be called “the sons of the anointed ones,”

18) Hallo and Younger, *Context of Scripture*, 315.

19) For two other references in Isaiah with similar nuances, see Isa 52:14; 54:16.

i.e., priests and prophets and even royal rulers (cf. 1:10), except here they are called quite the opposite? The meaning of this pun then implies that these children are far from anything that would be considered “anointed” ones.

Additionally, their inability “to know” is equally intriguing: “The ox knows its owner, and the donkey its master’s crib; but Israel *does not know* (לֹא יָדַע), my people *do not understand*” (1:3). The “he-ass” that knows its master makes a sharp contrast with Israel that does not know God, which might echo the famous story of the “she-ass” that chides Balaam’s inability to know God: “Balaam said to the angel of the Lord, ‘I have sinned, for I *did not know* that you were standing in the road to oppose me” (Num 22:34).²⁰ With these possible puns of Balaam and the talking donkey aside, the combination of the people’s obduracy (“not knowing”) and the potential word play of “anointing” makes it interesting to read the Cyrus passage with the intensified irony of Cyrus’s anointing and yet his ignorance (“not knowing”): “so that they may *know* (יָדַע), from the rising of the sun and from the west, that there is no one besides me; I am the Lord, and there is no other” (Isa 45:6; cf. 37:20).

In the ox and donkey passage, we find one more pun. Amidst the name calling on the obstinate Israel, the last phrase asserts that this people are “utterly estranged” (1:4). The pun found here forms a very different connotation of the word “estranged, become foreign” (נָזַר), whose root meaning is associated with “turning aside” or “turning away.” This word, however, sounds quite similar to the word “Nazirite” (cf. Numbers 6): “All the days of [his] Nazirite (נָזַר) vow no razor shall come upon the head” (Num 6:5; cf. Num 6:8, 12-13, 18-19, 21). The subtle effect adds to the irony in that the people who are supposed

20) The possible puns with the ox and donkey can be found in Isa 1:3; 21:7; 30:6, 24; 32:20 (see W. A. M. Beuken, “Women and the Spirit, the Ox and the Ass: The First Binders of the Booklet Isaiah 28–32,” *ETL* 74 [1998], 5-26).

to be holy and obedient have become backward-nazirites, having been utterly estranged. Not unlike Samson who forsook the Nazirite vocation and went after Philistine women (Judg 14:1-3), the Israelites have gone after foreign gods and policies.

The second case is the jubilee text. As stated above, Cyrus is called YHWH's anointed: "Thus says the Lord to his *anointed* (לַמְשִׁיחַ), to Cyrus, whose right hand I have grasped to subdue nations before him" (45:1). Now, in Chs. 60–62, we learn of another anonymous agent, who claims to be anointed and commissioned for a new task: "The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has *anointed* (מָשַׁח) me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners" (61:1). That the word "anointed" in the book of Isaiah (cf 21:5) occurs only in 45:1 and 61:1 in the designation of a human agent is striking. In light of the overall flow of the book of Isaiah, the compositional and resultant thematic shifts are noticeable. In the initial section, an anonymous Davidic king is anticipated to be the agent of just and righteous governance (11:1-2). In 45:1, we learn that YHWH designates Cyrus as "my anointed" in carrying out comparable tasks. Now, in 61:1, the agent is "anointed" and yet remains anonymous. It is intriguing that, other than Cyrus, neither of these agents are named. This anonymity seems to point to one possibility: whereas the servant is called "Jacob/Israel" in most of Isaiah 40–55, this anointed one, like the stump of Jesse, points to the Davidic line as a possibility. In other words, just as Cyrus the anointed would eventually be subordinated by YHWH's elevation of Jerusalem and Judah, so an anointed Davidic heir in 61:1 would be considered a righteous ruler (cf. 32:1), whose elevated status and significance may only have been password-protected by this anonymity.

2.3. Covenant and Light

In two of the so-called servant songs, there are peculiar phrases which have caused incessant debates and interpretations throughout centuries:

I have taken (וַאֲחֶזְקֶךָ)²¹ you by the hand and kept you, and I have given you as a *covenant* to the *people* (בְּרִית עַם), a *light* to the *nations* (אֹרֶךְ גּוֹיִם) (42:6);
It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the survivors of Israel; I will give you as a *light* to the *nations* (אֹרֶךְ גּוֹיִם), that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth. . . . I have kept you and I given you as a *covenant* to the *people* (בְּרִית עַם), to establish the land, to apportion the desolate heritages. (49:6, 8)

Although each word denotes a definite meaning, the combined phrases “a covenant to the people” and “a light to the nations” are not as self-explanatory as they might seem. Numerous renderings and comments are available in many significant monographs and commentaries. Without discounting those invaluable analyses, let us examine further possible insights via any possible pun.

In these texts, these peculiar phrases seem to denote something positive. One wonders whether the puns might be hidden with contrary meanings. For example, the word “light” (אֹרֶךְ) presumably connotes positive entity, symbol, and meanings (cf. 2:5).²² However, this word in Hebrew may appear or sound

21) See Hyun Chul Paul Kim, “The Spider-Poet: Signs and Symbols in Isaiah 41,” in *The Desert Will Bloom: Poetic Visions in Isaiah*, ed. A. Joseph Everson and Hyun Chul Paul Kim, SBLAIL 4 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2009), 159-79.

22) See Hyun Chul Paul Kim, “Metaphor, Memory, and Reality of the ‘Exile’ in Deutero-Isaiah,” in *Images of Exile in the Prophetic Literature: Copenhagen Conference Proceedings 7-10 May 2017*, ed. Jesper Høgenhaven, Frederik Poulsen, and Cian

similar to “woe” (אִיו), “curse” (אָרֶר), or even the “Nile” (יָאֹרֵד/יָאֹר).²³ It is difficult to find an equivalent to the word “covenant” (בְּרִית), unless we ponder on “blessing” (בְּרַכַּת), in its construct form, or “house” (בַּיִת). These puns seem far-fetched, as nothing overtly hints at their presence. Nevertheless, if ever intended, the implied meanings of these phrases can be heightened by these possibly intended puns.

These puns may effectively overturn the presumed assumption that the audience anticipates a decree of “blessing” to the people (Israel) and “woe or curse” to the (foreign) nations. This notion is consistent with the comparable phrase “a prophet (נְבִיא) to the nations” in Jer 1:5, which entails, at least syntactically, the prophetic messages of doom and judgment against the nations. If so, contrary to these presumed anticipations of the divine reprobation, the task of the servant is to be a “covenant” to the people(s) and a “light” to the nations.²⁴ Accordingly, and consistently, the meaning of the “light to the nations” is delineated in Isa 49:6: i.e., the message of the divine salvific work should not be limited to the tribes of Jacob or remnants of Israel, but rather should include the “nations” to the ends of the earth.

Power (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2019), 45-61.

23) For example, in Psalm 23, the contrasting concept of “good” versus “evil” runs as a key thematic thread. In this thread, the term “my shepherd” (רֹעִי) in Ps 23:1 appears similar to the term “evil” (רָע) or “seer” (רֹאֵה). Indeed, the psalmist confesses walking through the valley yet not fearing “evil” (רָע) in Ps 23:4, because of the faith that “goodness” (טוֹב) and mercy will sustain (Ps 23:6).

24) Claiming that Deutero-Isaiah is referring back to the memory of the Davidic covenant, Mark S. Smith highlights the theological shift or contrast that whereas in the psalm of Thanksgiving in Samuel, “the *enemies are to be crushed* and to come in defeat to the royal suppliant (2 Sam 22:32-50),... Isa 42:5-9 commissions the new royal ‘dynasty,’ Israel itself, to *save the ‘enemies’*” (“*Bērīt ‘am/Bērīt ‘ōlām*; A New Proposal for the Crux of Isa 42:6,” *JBL* 100 [1981]: 242, emphases added).

Concerning those peculiar phrases, “a covenant of people” and “a light of nations,” we should also note the possible cases of inner-biblical allusion in the subsequent texts. In the following texts of Isaiah, we thus find slight variations of these phrases:

Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live. I will make with you an *everlasting covenant* (ברית עולם), my steadfast, sure love for David (55:3);

The sun shall no longer be your light by day, nor for brightness shall the moon give light to you by night; but the Lord will be your *everlasting light* (אור עולם), and your God will be your glory. Your sun shall no more go down, or your moon withdraw itself; for the Lord will be your *everlasting light* (אור עולם), and your days of mourning shall be ended (60:19-20);

Because their shame was double, and dishonor was proclaimed as their lot, therefore they shall possess a double portion; *everlasting joy* (שמחת עולם; cf. 51:11) shall be theirs. For I the Lord love justice, I hate robbery and wrongdoing; I will faithfully give them their recompense, and I will make an *everlasting covenant* (ברית עולם) with them. Their descendants shall be known among the nations, and their offspring among the peoples; all who see them shall acknowledge that they are a [seed] whom the Lord has blessed. (61:7-9)

Several observations can be assessed on these texts and cases of intertextuality. First, if the connections between Isa 42:6; 49:6, 8 and Isa 60:19-20; 61:7-9 can be established, we note that both “covenant” and “light” become “eternal light” and “eternal covenant.” The puns can be found as well: from ברית עולם to עם, as well as from אור גוים to אור עולם. In these shifts, “people” or “nations” are replaced by “eternity.”

Second, as a result, these notions of “covenant” and even “light” in association with “eternity” seem to form close syntactical and thematic connections with the tradition of the Davidic covenant. In addition to the divine promise of the

perpetual protection of the Davidic dynasty (Isa 9:6 [Eng. 9:7]; 55:3; cf. 2 Sam 7:16), at the same time, the divine promise to make an “eternal covenant” with the entire exilic and rebuilt community points to the democratized theological reconceptualization.²⁵⁾

Third, these conceptual shifts eventually point to none other than YHWH as the source of eternal light and covenant.²⁶⁾ Just as the servant of YHWH (whoever he/she/they may be) was called to be a “covenant of people” and “light of nations” over against the conventional notions of the agent of judgment, so now this very “covenant” and “light” is identified with YHWH. The everlasting light and the everlasting covenant are of YHWH alone.

3. Conclusion

In the famous children’s book series by Dr. Seuss, e.g., *One Fish Two Fish Red Fish Blue Fish*, the list of those fun and educational puns appear continually, virtually everywhere. In the Hebrew Bible texts, how many of these puns can we find, let alone decipher and delineate, if accurately and properly detected? They are so cryptically encoded that they are difficult to find and decode, let alone count. Yet their places and functions are often too significant to skip or disregard. When observed and deciphered (as best as we can), these puns, word plays, and catchphrases can illumine new hidden meanings, helping us ponder those various possible renderings and thereby providing

25) Shalom M. Paul, *Isaiah 40–66: Translation and Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 437–38. See also Marvin A. Sweeney, *Isaiah 40–66*, FOTL, 245–46, 328–29.

26) Shawn Zelig Aster, *The Unbeatable Light: Melammu and Its Biblical Parallels*, AOAT 384 (Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 2012).

further clues concerning the redactional and thematic shifts and reconceptualizations.²⁷⁾

We may wonder how we can find these puns. While many of us are not Hebrew experts at the (ancient) native language level, the key to unlocking these secrets may be relatively simple: Read the Bible! Read it out loud, as we learn from Ps 1:2, “His delight is in the Torah of YHWH and on his Torah he *utters/performs out loud* (הגיד) day and night” (my translation).²⁸⁾ Somehow, through reading and reading aloud, we might treasure-hunt more puns. Puns intended for mnemonic devices. Puns employed for aesthetic beauty and appreciation. Puns utilized for fun, yet also for powerful inspiration and messages that otherwise might be missed, thereby evoking emotion, surprise, and hope. So, amid every effort to come up with scientific scrutiny in our exegetical tasks, let us also not too quickly glance over or altogether ignore any potential clues: we can “keep hearing but not understand,” or we can “keep hearing and understand,” in finding those elusive “*pun-ch-lines*”!

27) Even in Korean language, some words concoct our phonetic and linguistic imagination with other foreign languages, though it is more difficult to prove any authentic connections: e.g., “많이=many,” “기부=give,” “좋아요=joyeux,” and so on.

28) Nahum M. Sarna, *Songs of the Heart: An Introduction to the Book of Psalms* (New York: Schocken, 1993), 38: “What all this means is that the person described in our psalm is not one engaged in meditation and contemplation, such as is required in some mystical systems and traditions. Rather, this individual studies a sacred text which is the object of intense focus and concentration; and the method of study is reading aloud, rote learning, and constant oral repetition.”

<주제어>

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<초록>

이사야서의 해독에서 말놀이의 즐거움

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다른 히브리어 성경에서처럼, 이사야서는 언어적이고 주제적인 말놀이들이 가득하다. 이 말놀이들은 기억을 돕는 도구들, 문학적인 예술성, 혹은 구술적 행위를 위한 간명한 놀이일 수 있다. 그렇지만, 많은 경우에서 그것들은 비록 저자/편집자가 명백한 메시지를 전하면서도 비밀스러운 코드를 암시할 수 있듯이 미묘한 이중적 의미를 암시한다. 만약 그렇다면, 독자들은 있는 그대로의 평이하고도 명료한 의미를 파악해야 하면서도, 감추어진 의미를 해독해야 하고 이로써 놀라우면서도 숨어 있는 메시지를 풀어내어야 한다.

나는 이 글에서 문학적인 말놀이들의 경우들을 찾아내고(예, 사 1:3-4; 21:1; 22:1, 5; 40:1-5; 42:6; 46:1-2; 49:6-8; 55:3; 60:19-20; 61:7-9), 그들의 복합적인 의미를 설명하려고 한다. 그것들은 새롭고 대안적인 의미와 때로는 상반된 함의까지 드러낼 것이다. 내가 뽑아낸 말놀이들의 예들은 이사야서가 통일된 전체(通全)로서 탁월한 편집적, 통전적(通典的) 해석의 경향을 갖고 있음을 예증할 수 있기를 바란다.

<Abstract>

Fun in the Pun in Deciphering Isaiah

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Like the rest of the HB, the book of Isaiah is replete with linguistic and thematic puns. These puns may have functioned to provide mnemonic tools, literary artistry, or plain fun for oral performance. However, in many cases, they also allude to subtle double meanings, as though the author/redactor is both pronouncing explicit messages and hinting at secret codes. If that is the case, then readers are invited not only to comprehend that which is plain and obvious but also to decipher those hidden notions and thereby discover surprising and subsurface messages. The present study thus intends to explore instances of literary puns (e.g., Isa 1:3-4; 21:1; 22:1, 5; 40:1-5; 42:6; 46:1-2; 49:6-8; 55:3; 60:19-20; 61:7-9) and to expound their complex meanings, which suggest new, alternative, or even opposite implications in the text. It is further hoped that these select examples of puns may illustrate notable redactional and intertextual tendencies within the book of Isaiah as a unified whole.