

What Would Bakhtin Say about Isaiah 21:1-12?: A Re-reading*

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Preamble: Point of Departure

The postmodern consciousness of the “self” shapes my interpretive interest in the inner-life of the Hebrew personalities. Yet relative to the host of works devoted to the so-called “Confession of Jeremiah” (Jer 11-20),¹ the personhood of the prophet Isaiah has attracted little attention thus far.² As far as the Isaian internal profile is concerned, it is still an uncharted area in the current interpretive scene. With the employment of a psychological lens among other interdisciplinary tools, hermeneutical interests that were formerly dormant in my Chinese mind and repressed in my reader perspective, such as “self” and “emotion” are now placed at the foreground of exploration.³ The present study stems from the challenge⁴ of using the “I” window as the port of entry for uncovering the Isaian internal profile through the examination of the fifteen identifiable “I”-Passages (places where Isaiah speaks in the first-person singular voice)⁵ Up to now, my own endeavours in and adjacent to this line of inquiry have yielded some promising results⁶ and opened up new avenues for the portraiture of other Hebrew personalities.⁷

* I wish to acknowledge the contribution of my Research Assistant, Dustin Boreland, for his valuable input towards the production of this paper.

¹ E.g., Timothy Polk, in *The Prophetic Persona: Jeremiah and the Language of the Self* (JSOTSup 32; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1984) has set a milestone in prophetic research on the person of the prophet. Specific to this approach is what Polk describes as “synchrony and intentionality” (cf. pp. 8-18).

² Note that C. R. Seitz, in “Isaiah 1-66: Making Sense of the Whole,” *Reading and Preaching the Book of Isaiah* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988) has devoted a section on “The Prophetic Persona in Isaiah” (pp. 105-26).

³ According to Francis L.K. Hsu, the autonomy of the self is not recognized in traditional Chinese culture. The Chinese “self” can be described as both interdependent and sociocentric (or situation-centered). Cf. “The Self in Cross-Cultural Perspective,” eds., A. J. Marsella, G. DeVos, and F. L. K. Hsu, *Culture and Self: Asian and Western Perspectives* (New York: Tavistock), pp. 24-55.

⁴ Seitz summarized the state of the inquiry toward the end of the 1980s. For him, “attempts to pull a prophetic figure out of 2 Isaiah have proven difficult, and out of 3 Isaiah, *nearly impossible*” (Seitz, “Isaiah 1-66,” p. 120 [italics mine])

⁵ The 15 identifiable “I”-passages are: 5:1-30; 6:1-13; 8:1-18; 15:1-16:14; 21:1-12; 22:1-15; 24:1-23; 25:1-12; 26:1-21; 40:1-8; 49:1-6; 50:4-9; 51:17-23; 61:1-11; 63:7-19. Among the 15 passages, three distinct literary genres are represented: narrative (6:1-13; 8:1-18); prophetic oracles/speech (15:1-16:14; 21:1-12; 22:1-15); and poetry/song (the rest of the “I”-passages).

⁶ Cf. in particular, Barbara Leung Lai, “Uncovering the Isaian Personality: Wishful Thinking or Viable Task?” *Text and Community: Essays in Memory of Bruce M. Metzger*, Vol. 2, ed., J. Harold Ellens (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2007), pp. 82-100; and Leung Lai, “Aspirant Sage or Dysfunctional Seer? Cognitive Dissonance and Pastoral Vulnerability in the Profile of Daniel,” *Pastoral Psychology* 57 (2008): 199-210.

⁷ Besides those examples cited in n. 6, I am completing a monograph provisionally entitled, *The “I”-Window: Uncovering the Internal Profile of Hebrew Personalities*. Various dimensions of the interiority of Isaiah, Daniel, and God as a character are included in the exploration.

The following outline of the advances in recent personality studies provides the point of departure for the present study. As one among the fifteen “I”-passages, Isaiah 21:1-12 is unique with the intertwining of the speaking voices. There are pockets of monologues within dialogues and imaginary dialogues within monologues. Meir Sternberg⁸ and Alfonso Schökel⁹ have been successful in exemplifying the function of, the intricacy between, and the indeterminacy in identifying “monologue-dialogue” in the Hebrew Bible. Further, in “Vision and Voice in Isaiah,”¹⁰ Francis Landy has insightfully elucidated the interrelatedness between “voice and interiority.” I have carried these views further in developing the Isaian¹¹ and Danielic¹² “internal profiles” through the “I”-Window—the first-person texts in Isaiah,¹³ Daniel (chapter 7-12, the apocalyptic portion of the book), as well as the inner-life of the Hebrew God (e.g., the I-dirge poem in Hosea 11).¹⁴ At this juncture, some conceptual and methodological reorientation is required in light of the impact of the Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin on biblical studies. Incorporating the Bakhtinian perspective on polyphony and dialogism, I seek to revisit Isa 21:1-12 with newer angles of vision. It is my high hope that this integrated reading may further expand the horizon of readers and thus facilitate the emergence of a fuller and more sophisticated articulation of the “Isaian interiority.”

Re-orientation

Theoretically, the proposed re-reading of Isaiah 21:1-12 necessitates the following conceptual and methodological re-orientations:

(1) A historically inquiring synchronic approach¹⁵ to the Isaian “self” is perceived as something that is hidden or embedded—something that needs to be uncovered through the “I”-window. The constitution of the Bakhtinian “self” requires a consciousness of the existence of and relationship with the “other.”¹⁶ In essence, it is interdependent and sociocentric.

2) As a major point of entry, “emotions” are perceived as markers of the construction of the Isaian “self.” Uncovering this hidden aspect through the prophet’s emotive response to the harsh vision (v. 2) is integral to constructing the Isaian internal profile. Yet, emotion finds no

⁸ Meir Sternberg, “The World from the Addressee’s Viewpoint: Reception as Representation, Dialogue as Monologue,” *Style* 20 (1986): 295-318.

⁹ Alonso L. Schökel, *A Manual of Hebrew Poetics* (Editrice Pontificio Instituto Biblico, 1998).

¹⁰ Francis Landy, “Vision and Voice in Isaiah,” *JSOT* 88 (2000): 19-36.

¹¹ Cf. Leung Lai, “Uncovering the Isaian Personality,” pp. 82-100; and “Total Otherness, Awe-Driven Self-Condemnation, and Atonement for Guilt: The Psychology of Religion and Guilt in Isaiah 6,” *Advances in Psychology Research*, vol. 68 (Nova Publishers, forthcoming).

¹² Leung Lai, “Aspirant Sage or Dysfunctional Seer?” pp. 199-210.

¹³ Cf. n. 5 above for relevant passages.

¹⁴ Leung Lai, “Hearing God’s Bitter Cries (Hoses 11:1-9): Reading Emotive-Experiencing, Appropriation,” *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 26 (2004): 24-29.

¹⁵ An approach proposed by Odil Hannes Steck, *The Prophetic Books and their Theological Witness*, trans., James D. Nogalski (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2000), p. 20.

¹⁶ Leszek Koczanowicz, “Freedom and Communication: The Concept of Human Self in Mead and Bakhtin,” *Dialogism* 4 (2000), p. 60.

prominence in the Bakhtinian construction of the “self.” One has to shift from an emotive realm to a more philosophical realm in order to read the human “self” from a Bakhtinian perspective.¹⁷

3) Unique to Isa 21:1-12 is the multiplicity of speaking voices. The different aspects of Isaiah’s interiority are expressed through the prophet’s self-representation (i.e. the first-person projection of the third-person view in vv. 6-9, and the imaginary dialogue in vv. 11-12). Therefore, the identification of these speaking voices becomes the focal point of textual analysis. In terms of identification, the speaking voices are found to be rather “indeterminate,” and thus a quite sophisticated “merge.” The Bakhtinian notion of a multi-voiced literary work (or “polyphonic text”) foregrounds the presence of unmerged voices/consciousnesses. Each voice/consciousness embodies an independent perspective and engages into a dialogical relationship with the other ideas or consciousnesses represented within the text.

4) The identification of the different Isaian I-perspectives through the sophisticated literary devices of imaginary dialogues within monologue and monologues within dialogue calls for a consideration of the Bakhtinian trajectory. The dynamics can be read as the shifting of the different I-positions in the Isaian self-representation through different unmerged voices, imaginary or real.

5) Finally, the Bakhtinian framework necessitates a re-orientation with respect to the role of the author, the characters/personalities within the text, and the reader, as they are invited to enter into an ongoing, open dialogue with the ideas and consciousnesses within the text.

What Would Bakhtin Say about Isaiah 21:1-12?: An Integrated Re-reading

The multiplicity of speaking voices and the presence of monologues and imaginary dialogues within monologues form the crux of the Isaian self-presentation. Adopting Sternberg’s view on the function of monologue (vv. 6-9, linked with interior dialogue, i.e., the internal “doubling-of-oneself”) and imaginary dialogue (vv. 11-12),¹⁸ one can collapse the distinctiveness between dialogue and monologue as they serve the same function in Isa 21:6-9 & 11-12. The present inquiry will focus on the way that the Bakhtinian theory of dialogism and polyphony may offer a new angle of perception and expand the reader’s horizon in reading Isa 21:1-12. More specifically, in what ways would a Bakhtinian understanding of the interchange between interior monologues and imaginary dialogues present within the text provide access to the “rich portrayal of the...hidden aspects of the Isaian pathos” evident within Isa 21:1-12.¹⁹

Bakhtin’s concepts of polyphony and dialogism stem from his analysis of the work of Russian novelist, Fyodor Dostoevsky. The writings of Dostoevsky, argued Bakhtin, possessed and approximated a genuine dialogue between author, characters, and consciousnesses.²⁰ Dostoevsky’s writing style directly inspired the development of Bakhtin’s notions of discourse and literature. On a deeper, linguistic level, Bakhtin argued that the basic unit of speech is not the

¹⁷ E.g., the different I-positions: I-for-myself; I-for-others; and Others-for me.

¹⁸ Cf. Sternberg, pp. 295-318. Also, cf. the extended analysis in Leung Lai, “Uncovering the Isaian Personality,” pp. 91-96.

¹⁹ Leung Lai, “Uncovering the Isaian Personality,” p. 93.

²⁰ See Carol A. Newsom, “Bakhtin, the Bible, and Dialogic Truth,” *The Journal of Religion* 76.2 (1996), p. 295.

word or sentence construct, but the ‘utterance.’ Any utterance, or discourse rather, whether spoken or written, is always addressed to someone, and therefore possesses a dialogic quality.²¹ Thus, at the foundation of Bakhtin’s ideology is the view that any form of discourse is always a reply and further, that it always takes shape in response to what has already been said, including “the background of other concrete utterances on the same theme, a background made up of contradictory opinions, points of view and value judgments.”²² Newsom explains:

An utterance is also shaped by an orientation to the listener in anticipation of what might be said by one who hears it. Thus, no matter how monologic the form of the utterance, one can inquire about the way in which it is implicitly dialogized by its orientation to the already said and the yet to be said.²³

Therefore, any form of discourse always “replies in implicit dialogue with what has already been said.”²⁴

This classification of dialogism leads to what Bakhtin calls “dialogic truth.” Dialogic truth exists at the “point of intersection of several unmerged voices.”²⁵ Distinct from monologic truth, dialogic truth “requires a plurality of consciousness...[which] in principle cannot be fitted within the bounds of a single consciousness.”²⁶ Thus, dialogic or polyphonic writing requires the author to surrender whole control over the consciousnesses represented within the text. By creating several different consciousnesses independent of their own, the author renders their perspective as one consciousness among many, “without privilege.”²⁷ The end result is a free interaction between several, independent consciousnesses.²⁸

In accord with Bakhtin’s classification of dialogism and dialogic truth, Isa 21:1-12 could also be read as a dialogic text, containing dialogic truths.²⁹ Verse 10 best captures the dialogic context of the pericope as a whole: “O my threshed people,³⁰ the son of my threshing floor! What I have heard from the Lord of Hosts, the God of Israel, I have told you.” This verse provides a window into the mind of the prophet as he moves from the recipient of the harsh vision (v.2) to the messenger of the divine message. In fulfilling his responsibility as God’s mouth-piece, on the one hand, he embraces the full impact of the severity of the vision both physically (v.3-4) and emotively (vv. 8, 11-12). Yet on the other hand, he renounces his monologic individuality and

²¹ Mikhail M. Bakhtin, “The Problem of Speech Genre,” *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, trans., V. McGee (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986), pp. 60-102. Cf. Andres A. Haye, “Living Being and Speaking Being: Toward a Dialogical Approach to Intentionality,” *Integr Psych Behav* 42 (2008), pp. 160-161.

²² Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed., Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986), p. 281. See also, Newsom, “Bakhtin,” p. 302.

²³ Newsom, “The Book of Job as Polyphonic Text,” *JSOT* 97 (2002), p. 90.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, ed. and trans., C. Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p. 81.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Newsom, “Bakhtin,” pp. 295-296.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 292.

³⁰ Literally, it reads “O my threshed, the son of my threshing floor!” For more, cf. Leung Lai, “Uncovering the Isaian Personality,” p. 93, n. 49.

instead engages in a sort of dialogic relationship with God, self, and audience (Babylon, Israel, and Dumah). Using a fair bit of imaginative extension, this movement corresponds to what Bakhtin would have referred to as the “Being-as-event” (i.e. the emotional-volitional moments: I, the other, and I-for-the-other—experienced by Isaiah, in his world of actions).³¹ Therefore, each Isaian utterance within the text (whether monologic or imaginative-dialogic [e.g., vv. 11-12]) possesses a layered meaning based on the internal interaction between the “I” (Isaiah), the “other” (God), and the “I-for-the-other” (first audience and contemporary readers). However, a literary tension arises due to the overwhelming number of “indeterminate” speaking voices within the monologic speeches and imaginary dialogues Isaiah uses to communicate his inner thoughts and feelings. Digging into the inner-life of the prophet behind the utterance(s) is a complex process composed of multiple layers of meaning. Whereas monologue is rightly understood as a literary device used to “depict the self-consciousness and other aspects of the inner life of [a] personality,” Schökel’s qualification of monologue as “the breaking into a context of dialogue with a reflection directed to oneself” reveals a whole new dimension of Isa 21:1-12.³² By modifying the established functions of monologue, where a self-contained consciousness expresses an individual truth, the Bakhtinian perspective allows for the identification of the vibrant dialogic relationship accommodated by monologic expressions.

The monologic, or I-expressions within Isaiah 21:1-12 pose a unique set of challenges with respect to Bakhtin’s theory of polyphony and dialogism. Newsom points out that in Bakhtin’s notion of dialogic truth, there is no such thing as “no-man’s thoughts,” because who says them is of the essence.³³ Therefore, dialogic truth has a unique personal quality, where the personality of the speaker becomes integral to the very meaning of the discourse itself.³⁴ If the persons who utter the speech are central to the dialogic truth expressed within those propositions, the internal profile of Isaiah (or the “Isaian pathos”) becomes central to discerning the very meaning of the prophetic message. However, the task of peering in through the I-window of the Isaian internal profile is complicated by the multiplicity of I-personalities within the passage. The application of the Bakhtinian model therefore becomes central to an effective and productive appropriation of the prophet’s internal profile. Landy has advocated convincingly the interrelatedness between “voice and interiority,” and that the different versions of the “I” within Isa 21:1-12 should be regarded as independent, but integrated “voices” (spoken or unspoken; imaginative or real), rather than a mere *form* of expression.³⁵ In essence, there is no such thing as “monologue” within Isa 21:1-12, whether exterior or interior. The prophet is constantly and consistently in dialogue with his surroundings (contexts), whether it is his own internal emotions, God, his audience, or the doubling-up of himself. Or, alternatively, in the ongoing world of

³¹ Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *Toward a Philosophy of the Act*, eds., V. Liapunov and M. Holquist, trans., V. Liapunov (University of Texas Press, 1993), p. 54. Cf. also Leszek Koczanowicz, “Freedom and Communication,” pp. 62-66.

³² Leung Lai, “Uncovering the Isaian Personality,” p. 92; Schökel, p. 178.

³³ Newsom, “Bakhtin,” p. 294.

³⁴ Cf. Newsom, “The Book of Job,” pp. 91-92.

³⁵ Cf. Landy, “Vision and Voice in Isaiah,” pp. 19-36.

actions (Being-as event), Bakhtin would have articulated this dynamic as “Isaiah-for-himself, the other-for-Isaiah, and Isaiah-for-the-other.”³⁶

Thus, the multiplicity of speaking voices contained in Isa 21:1-12 is given meaning by the personality of the speaker himself; namely, the prophet Isaiah. One can identify the speaking voices represented in Isa 21:1-12 as: God (vv. 2b, 6, 11a); the obvious (vv. 2a, 3-4, 10) and apparent (vv. 5, 8b, 12) Isaian “I”-voice; the watchman’s (or the first-person projection of the third-person voice: vv. 7, 8a, 12); and finally, the messenger’s (v. 9).³⁷ In addition, we find some intriguing dialogues presented within the text: God’s command to Isaiah is retold in a first-person report (vv. 6-7); the watchman’s first person dialogue with God is retold in the third person (vv. 8-9); and Isaiah’s dialogue with the watchman is narrated in the third-person (vv. 7, 8a, 9). The multiple speaking voices should be perceived as neutral expressions that find their existence and meaning in the speaker, that is, Isaiah.³⁸ The internal profile deductible from Isa 21:1-12 is therefore the sum of its parts; the expressions and perspectives communicated through the interchanging of multiple I-positions/life-positions.³⁹ Notwithstanding the fact that from a Bakhtinian perspective, Isa 21:1-12 contains no exterior or interior monologues, it is the monologic expressions that facilitate the outward expression of the interior profile of the prophet. In other words:

From my audience perspective, it is interesting to note that ‘dialogues’ cannot convey the ‘inwardness’ of the struggle. ‘Actions’ cannot even come close to portraying a struggle that is both emotional and mental. Through the course of these unspoken inner thoughts, these inward silent acts, I perceive the developing, accumulating, intensifying, deepening results of [the Isaian] inner struggles being brought to the foreground.⁴⁰

For this reason, it is important to look past the “foreground” of monologic expressions to the deeper, embedded dialogue transpiring within the consciousness of the prophet. In this way, meaning is not forged only by isolated or independent monologues or dialogues, but by the dynamic fusion of speaking voices.

It is here that my appropriation of Sternberg’s notion of “imaginary dialogue within monologue” acquires prominence for the Bakhtinian reading of Isa 21:1-12. I have argued elsewhere that the “more, embedded side of the Isaian pathos is represented within the literary framework of imaginary dialogues, or monologue within dialogue.”⁴¹ Therefore, as mentioned above, the speaking voices within dialogue and monologue are to some degree “indeterminate,” or without certain meaning, because “there are pockets of monologue in dialogue and imaginary

³⁶ Cf. n. 31.

³⁷ Adapted from Leung Lai, “Uncovering the Isaian Personality,” p. 96.

³⁸ Charles Miller follows a similar appropriation of Bakhtin in “Reading Voices: Personification, Dialogism, and the Reader of Lamentations 1,” *Biblical Interpretation* 9.4 (2001), p. 393.

³⁹ Cf. Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, pp. 81; 89.

⁴⁰ Leung Lai, “Uncovering the Isaian Personality,” p. 93.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 94.

dialogue in monologue.”⁴² Since for Bakhtin all discourse possesses a dialogic quality, those passages using the third-person perspective projection of a first-person view (vv. 6-9, 11-12) represent two interdependent dialogic relationships. First, dialogism precedes the prophet’s monologic I-expressions, since an internal, “emotional” dialogue determines the outward monologic expressions; and second, the monologic disclosure of Isaiah’s internal emotions gives the audience access to the “unfinalizability”⁴³ of the Isaian internal profile, enabling them to enter into dialogue with the constant and perpetual development of the prophet’s “interiority.”⁴⁴

This is best illustrated by Isaiah’s self-representation through the voice of the watchman in vv. 6-9. First, God’s command to Isaiah is retold in the first person: “For thus the Lord said to me: Go, set a watchman; let him announce what he sees. And he sees riders, horsemen in pairs, riders on donkeys, riders on camels, let him listen diligently, very diligently” (vv. 6-7). Then, the watchman’s first-person dialogue with God is reported in the third person:

Then he who saw cried out: ‘Upon a watchtower I stand, O Lord, continually by day, and at my post I am stationed whole nights. And behold, here come riders, horsemen in pairs!’ And he answered, ‘Fallen, fallen is Babylon; hand all the carved images of her gods he has shattered to the ground’ (vv. 8-9).

As demonstrated by these verses, both Isaiah’s first-person and third-person discourse are actively engaged in an implicit dialogue with what has already been said; whether by Isaiah as internal dialogue (vv. 2-4, 10), God as an external command to Isaiah (vv. 2b, 6) the projected third person discourse (or imaginary dialogue between God and the watchman, vv. 6-9), the unidentified speaking voice from Seir (v. 11) or the anticipated response of the intended recipients of the prophetic message. In compliance with the Bakhtinian perspective, the various “voices” or consciousnesses within this passage are free to interact independently with one another to create other forms of dialogic discourse. As Isaiah identifies himself with the watchman, he assumes a consciousness other than his own. Resultantly, the prophet enters into an existential and internal dialogue with the emotions, experiences, and ethos of the watchman. Therefore, the creative literary fusion of Isaiah’s consciousness as prophet and Isaiah’s consciousness as watchman reveals the dialogic interchange experienced by the author.⁴⁵

⁴² Ibid., p. 91.

⁴³ Bakhtin’s use of the term, “unfinalizability” is especially significant to our appreciation of the personality of the prophet Isaiah. Essentially, Bakhtin used this term to describe the openness and indeterminacy of dialogic truth. Bakhtin writes: “Nothing conclusive has yet taken place in the world, the ultimate word of the world and about the world has not yet been spoken, the world is open and free, everything is still in the future, and will always be in the future (cf. Bakhtin, *Problems*, p. 81).” Therefore, individual people or personalities are never finalized, or completely understood. As such, a person is never fully revealed or known in the world.

⁴⁴ Leung Lai, “Uncovering the Isaian Personality,” pp. 96-97.

⁴⁵ Additionally, I argue elsewhere that the imaginary dialogue within monologue in vv. 6-9 and 11-12 “creates a space for Isaiah to relieve his tension and anxiety, his feelings of helplessness and frustration.” See Leung Lai, “Uncovering the Isaian Personality,” p. 96.

As such, the “dialogical self” or “Isaian pathos” embedded in Isa 21:1-12 functions as a dynamic multiplicity of I-positions in the landscape of the mind.⁴⁶ We must ask whether the multiplicity of speaking voices or consciousnesses in Isa 21:1-12 function as an intentional artistic expression, an external expression of the prophet’s emotional state, or both.⁴⁷ Recall, that for Bakhtin, “the polyphonic text is an intentional artistic representation of the dialogic nature of an idea.”⁴⁸ If the multiplicity of speaking voices within Isa 21:1-12 are viewed as intentional, what effect does this have on the audience? What emotions do the prophet intend to evoke within his audience? The most informed answer to such questions embraces a “both-and” as opposed to an “either-or” response. On the one hand, Bakhtin’s notion of intentionality within polyphonic text fits well with Isa 21:1-12. The complexity of the speaking voices represented in chapter 21 demonstrates the refined and sophisticated techniques of Isaiah’s self-presentation.⁴⁹ It is the very presence of the intentionally placed I-window that allows for the identification of the Isaian interiority. On the other hand, the means by which the prophet chooses to communicate his harsh and emotional experiences (monologues within dialogues and imaginary dialogues within monologues), is caused by those same emotions (i.e. fear, pain, agony, lamenting cries, anxiety, impatience and helplessness). Both, the means and product of the communication of the Isaian internal profile are one and the same; the emotions of the prophet that stem from the internal, existential dialogue.

As stated above, the key here is to explore the way that the Bakhtinian models of polyphony and dialogism can apply to the monologues within dialogues and imaginary dialogues within monologues contained within Isa 21:1-12. Prophetic speech is, in essence, emotive language. It is necessary that any application of the Bakhtinian model of polyphony and dialogism to Isaiah’s prophetic oracles must first consider the emotive quality of the prophet’s self-representation.⁵⁰ If monologue is considered as the “most powerful and effective means by which something that is embedded and inward (e.g., emotions) can be brought to the foreground,” the emotive realm of prophetic utterance must be the core of examination.⁵¹ Timothy Polk writes: “Emotion language not only attests a self, it is constitutive of the self. People become selves as they use such language.”⁵² The emotionality of Isaiah’s role as prophet is characterized by the expressions of the physical pain and emotional stress he experiences

⁴⁶ Cf. Hubert Hermans, and Agnieszka Hermans-Konopka, *Dialogical Self Theory: Positioning and Counter-Positioning in a Globalizing Society* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming); and Hubert Hermans, H.J.G. Kempen, and R.J.P. Van Loon, “The Dialogical Self: Beyond Individualism and Rationalism,” *American Psychologist* 47 (1992): 23-33.

⁴⁷ Cf. Newsom, “Bakhtin,” p. 297.

⁴⁸ Adapted from Newsom, “Bakhtin,” p. 297.

⁴⁹ Leung Lai, “Uncovering the Isaian Personality,” p. 97.

⁵⁰ I have found this emotive dimension quite unattended in the Bakhtinian discussions on polyphony and dialogism.

⁵¹ Leung Lai, “Uncovering the Isaian Personality,” p. 93.

⁵² Polk, p. 24. Note that the centre of Polk’s study (constructing the persona of Jeremiah from the personal “I”-passages) is akin to my study in “Uncovering the Isaian Personality,” pp. 82-100.

resulting from the harsh vision.⁵³ As such, the emotive quality of the Isaian discourse affects the dialogic relationship of the text in two major ways. First, the internal, emotive state of Isaiah dictates and largely determines the outward deliverance of his prophetic message. Second, these same emotions are intimately linked to the reception of the message, and have the transitive impact upon the audience's own emotions. In fact, even as a twenty-first century reader of Isa 21:1-12, the dialogical and emotional experiences of the prophet emanate from the pages. On this ground, readers are drawn to participate in the silent question and answer⁵⁴ dialogue with the watchman—"Watchman, what of the night? Watchman, what of the night?" In attending to the inquiry, Isaiah replies, "morning is coming, but also the night. If you earnestly inquire—Inquire! Return! Come!" (v.12b). As a truly polyphonic text, Isaiah 21:1-12 ends "silently and openly," earnestly inviting the readers (with their own voice/consciousness) to engage in an "unfinalizable," ongoing quest that is of a dialogic nature.

Bakhtin & Beyond

The Bakhtinian notion of "unfinalizability" as related to engaging the biblical text goes far beyond the conventional "empirics" of reader response. While the end product of all reader-oriented interpretations (in essence, "all" readings) is the meaning-significance found within the text, a Bakhtinian reading of the Bible demands a deeper level of the reader's consciousness, including the existence of the "others" in expressing any concept; which is in essence, dialogical in nature. As there is no "final" word for texts of a polyphonic nature, the process of presenting "truths/ideas" finds its prominence in the Bakhtinian way of reading. In this very sense and as the name of this section (Bakhtin and Biblical Imagination) implies—"imagination" has no boundary and thus opens up highways and byways for biblical scholars to venture from their respective methodological locations. I have personally found this "openness" an inviting and rather captivating force. It further extends the horizon of biblical studies and offers real possibilities for an integrative re-reading—one that is collaboratively "historically-inquiring-synchronic, psychological, philosophical, and imaginative."

⁵³ Cf. Leung Lai, "Uncovering the Isaian Personality," p. 88.

⁵⁴ Peter Miscall notes that since the word *דמיה* in Hebrew means "silence," so are the question and answer a type of silence; see Peter D. Miscall, *Isaiah* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), p. 60.

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