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AGRARIAN HOPE IN ISAIAH 40–55

William L. Kelly

Abstract

It is widely recognized that hope is a central theme in Deutero-Isaiah (Isa 40–55). With the help of interdisciplinary work in ecological criticism and moral philosophy, this article analyzes the theme of hope in the text and argues that the renewal of the natural environment is central to its vision for the future. Using insights drawn from agrarian approaches to biblical texts, the article shows how this renewal is understood as mutually beneficial for both humans and the land, strongly linking the flourishing of Zion with the Judean hinterland. This is demonstrated through a survey of language in the text referring to the natural landscape and readings of specific texts relating to the theme of ecological restoration (41:17–20; 43:16–21; 44:23; 45:8; 51:1–8; 55:1–13). As Deutero-Isaiah's message of hope responds to the experience of cultural disaster in the sixth century BCE, it resembles the "radical hope" identified by Jonathan Lear. This hope stands apart from the traditional institutional forms of monarchy and Temple, and instead looks toward a vision of human flourishing deeply connected to the landscape.
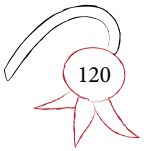
On reconnaît habituellement que l'espoir est un thème central du Deutéro-Ésaïe (És 40–55). À travers un travail interdisciplinaire en critique écologique et en philosophie morale, cet article analyse le thème de l'espoir dans le texte et soutient que le renouveau de l'environnement naturel est au cœur de sa vision de l'avenir. Avec l'aide d'approches agraires des textes bibliques, cette contribution montre comment ce renouveau est mutuellement bénéfique pour les humains et la terre, liant fortement l'épanouissement de Sion à l'arrière-pays judéen. Cela est démontré par un examen du langage du texte faisant référence au paysage naturel et par la lecture de textes spécifiques relatifs au thème de la restauration écologique (4 :17–20 ; 43 :16–21 ; 44 :23 ; 45 :8 ; 51 :1–8 ; 55 :1–13). Comme le message d'espoir du Deutéro-Ésaïe répond à l'expérience d'un désastre culturel au sixième siècle avant notre ère, il se rapproche de « l'espoir radical » identifié par Jonathan Lear. Cet espoir se démarque des formes institutionnelles traditionnelles telles que la monarchie et le temple et se tourne plutôt vers une vision de l'épanouissement humain profondément lié au paysage.

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AGRARIAN HOPE IN ISAIAH 40–55

William L. Kelly

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> Found your hope, then, on the ground under your feet.
>
> —Wendell Berry[1]

Introduction

All of the biblical texts from the sixth century BCE are "attempting in one way or another to cope with the experience of disaster" (Blenkinsopp 2002, 104). While some of these texts dwell on the experience of disaster itself (e.g., Lamentations), Deutero-Isaiah (Isa 40–55) responds with a message of hope.[2] As a human phenomenon, hope is usually under-

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[1] Berry 2010.

[2] There are numerous intertextual connections between Lamentations and Deutero-Isaiah, so much so that "Isa 40–55 actively interacts with and sometimes also reverses statements in Lamentations" (Tiemeyer 2011, 348). See Gottwald, 1954, 44–45; Tull Willey 1997, 48–50, 86–89, 256–66; Seitz 1998, 130–49; Sommer 1998, 127–30; Linafelt 2000, 62–79.

stood as a combination of desire and belief in the face of uncertainty.[3] What makes hope distinct from belief in philosophical terms is usually a third element, whether a perceived route to achieving one's hope, a resolve to fulfill the hope, or an external factor such as fate or, as is the case for the Hebrew Bible, God.[4] My aim in this article is to show how the hope articulated by Deutero-Isaiah envisions a future where the natural environment is renewed for the benefit of both humans and the land itself. Instead of basing its hopes on the traditional institutional pillars of Judean society—monarchy and Temple—the text of Deutero-Isaiah envisions a flourishing social order based on an integrated, reciprocal relationship between city and landscape.

Two interdisciplinary works serve as the framework for this analysis. The first comes from a growing body of scholarly literature in biblical studies that seeks to recover the ecological concerns of the text that have been neglected or overshadowed by androcentrism.[5] One subset of this approach is the agrarian perspective advocated by Ellen Davis (2009). Agrarian thinking is a "comprehensive way of viewing the world and the human place in it," and it is seen in the pervasive "appreciation and concern for the health of the land" in the biblical text (Davis 2009, 1). Arising from the insight that the basic human act of eating has ramifications for "virtually every other aspect of public and private life" (Davis 2009, 22), the ethics of land resource management and agricultural practice are a major aspect of this approach. Davis (2009, 155–78) highlights the ways that an agrarian reading reveals how biblical texts view cities as social locations fully integrated with their hinterland.[6]

The second work considers the phenomenon of cultural devastation, or a complete breakdown of a cultural way of life when the very meas-

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[3] For recent overviews of hope, see Heuvel 2020; Bloeser and Stahl 2022.

[4] Mies 2010, 714–15; Milona 2020. There is a wide body of literature on the topic; see, e.g., Boer 1954; Ploeg 1954; Westermann 1964; Zimmerli 1971; Hubbard 1983; Menxel 1983; Groß 1988; Dempsey 1999; Williamson 2000.

[5] Almost all studies in this area note the seminal influence of White 1967. See also Habel 2008; Horrell 2009, 2010; Horrell et al. 2010; Nilsen and Solevåg 2016; Kavusa 2019; Northcott 2020; Marlow and Harris 2022a.

[6] This insight has not gone unrecognized elsewhere; see Gray 2018, 30.

ures of what it means to live a good life become unintelligible. This possibility, and the possibility to respond to it with hope, is the central preoccupation of Jonathan Lear's (2006) book *Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation*.[7] In a case study of the Crow Indians, the increasing threats to their continued existence in the latter half of the nineteenth century, and their decision to ally themselves with the United States government, Lear considers the case of Plenty Coups, "the last great chief of the Crow nation." Witnessing his own culture collapse, Plenty Coups sought to chart a new course of human flourishing for his people (Lear 2006, 1).[8] While the particular historical contingencies faced by the Crow were unique, Lear claims to have uncovered an ontological "vulnerability that we all share simply in virtue of being human" (2006, 8), one where our cultures can completely fall apart, which then invites analogical comparisons with similar instances of hope responding to cultural devastation. Lear himself has suggested that the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple is a relevant analogy,[9] and while Hindy Najman (2014, 13–16, 123–54) has used Lear's framework in her analysis of 4 Ezra, no previous study has considered the case of Deutero-Isaiah or the cultural disasters of the sixth century BCE.
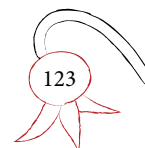
Ecological Hope in Deutero-Isaiah

Hope is a foundational theme in the book of Isaiah, no less in Deutero-Isaiah.[10] This is evident in terms of language, as there are four instances of the primary term for hope (*qwh*) itself (Isa 40:31; 44:13;

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[7] Critical responses to the book (Dreyfus 2009; Sherman 2009) were published in the journal *Philosophical Studies* together with a response from Lear (2009).

[8] The name "Plenty Coups" is a rough translation of the Crow name Alaxchiiaahush ("Many Achievements"); see Lear 2006, 20.

[9] Lear 2006, 163n43. There is some ambiguity to Lear's reference, but I take him to have in mind the destruction of the Temple by the Romans in 70 CE.

[10] With no intention to advance any claims here regarding its author, I will refer to these chapters as "Deutero-Isaiah" throughout. Issues related to authorship and the composition history of the book of Isaiah are extensive. Since my interests in this article are primarily thematic, I will approach the text of Isaiah 40–55 as a

49:23; 51:5) and two instances of *yḥl* ("wait, hope") as well (42:4; 51:5), and the text makes frequent use of lexemes that express related ideas, such as *nḥm* ("comfort"),[11] *rḥm* ("have compassion upon"),[12] *gʾl* ("redeem"),[13] and *ʿzr* ("help").[14] The common view is that this hope primarily pertains to the destiny of the city of Jerusalem and its rebuilding after the destruction of the city and the Exile.[15] A large amount of scholarship has shown the importance of the "Zion tradition" for the book of Isaiah as the grounding ideology of these hopes, and more recent scholarship has emphasized the literary role played by Zion/Jerusalem as a unifying theme across the book (see Poulsen 2020, 266–68). The city is one of the main addressees of Deutero-Isaiah, along with Jacob/ Israel (Isa 40–48), with references to Jerusalem (40:1–2; 51:17) and Zion (49:14–21; 51:3, 11, 16) appearing independently or in parallel with one another (40:9; 41:27; 44:26; 52:1–6, 7–9). The prevalence of these terms rises as one proceeds through Deutero-Isaiah, and this pattern continues into Trito-Isaiah, culminating in the description of the restored Jerusalem (60–62), sometimes considered its original literary kernel.[16] Deutero-Isaiah opens with a tenderly spoken message of comfort for the city (40:1–2); it describes the expansion of its territory as her borders are enlarged and extended like a tent covering a wider area (54:2–3);[17] it hopes for the restoration of the city's gates, battlements, and walls with extravagant materials (54:11–12). All of this restoration

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unity despite the fact that it is clear that these chapters were edited over time. For references to literature on the topic, see Becker 2020.

[11] Isa 40:1; 49:13; 51:3, 51:19; 52:9; see also 51:12; 54:11.

[12] Isa 49:10, 13, 15; 54:8, 10; 55:7.

[13] Isa 43:1; 44:22–23; 48:20; 52:9; see also 41:14; 43:14; 44:6, 24; 47:4; 48:17; 49:7, 26; 54:5, 8; Waschke 1989.

[14] Isa 41:6, 10, 13, 14; 44:2; 49:8; 50:7, 9.

[15] Jacob Stromberg calls this "arguably the most pervasive theme in the book" (2011a, 62). See, for example, the essays in Wieringen and Woude 2011.

[16] See esp. Steck 1986; Stromberg 2011b, 11–13, 27–30.

[17] We also see a similar idea in Isaiah 60:21, where the text promises the possession of land—without the definite article, as in Psalm 37:3—with the aim to right social wrongs (Blenkinsopp 2003, 218).

for Jerusalem is "good news" for the villages and towns of Judah (40:9–11),[18] which are also assured that they will be rebuilt (44:26; 49:19).

What is often overshadowed by Deutero-Isaiah's clear interest in the city of Jerusalem is the extent to which this interest is paired with an abiding concern for the land. For all the hopeful expectations for the city itself, the text contains a striking amount of language and imagery drawn from the physical, or natural, world. In the past, this language has been seen predominantly as either a part of a "new exodus" theme in Deutero-Isaiah,[19] or as a series of metaphors without any particular historical referent.[20] As I will show, however, an ecological approach to the text, particularly with an agrarian perspective, reveals new possibilities for understanding the hope expressed in it.

While there is neither a generalized concept of "nature" in the Hebrew Bible, nor a strict ontological distinction between "natural" and "human" space (Simkins 2022, 270–71), there are a number of lexemes that refer to the parts of the physical world that do not arise from human design or intention (Marlow and Harris 2022b, 2–4). The overarching term for the material world is the merism *šāmayîm vāʾāreṣ* ("heavens and earth"), and notably these terms appear twice together in Deutero-Isaiah as a direct addressee in the text in addition to Jacob/Israel and Zion/Jerusalem (Isa 44:23; cf. 45:8).[21] The prevalence of terminology for the physical environment suggests its signal importance for Deutero-Isaiah (Marlow 2022). The most common and generic term for the physical world is *ʾereṣ,* which appears forty-two times in Deutero-Isaiah.[22] These instances, combined with more than

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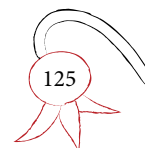
[18] The distinction between Jerusalem and other cities ("in reality, settlements, farms, and villages") is encapsulated in the designation "Judah and Jerusalem" found in late texts from the Persian period onward (2 Chr 11:14; 20:17; 24:6, 8; Ezra 9:9; 10:7; Isa 1:1; 2:1). "It is therefore unsurprising and unexceptional if Jerusalem is called on to proclaim good news to the cities of Judah" (Blenkinsopp 2002, 185).

[19] For a summary of past scholarship, see Tiemeyer 2011, 156–68.

[20] Barstad 1989; cf. Schmid 2014, 180–98.

[21] Goldingay 2005, 272; Joerstad 2019, 148.

[22] Isa 41:9, 18; 42:4, 5, 10; 43:6; 44:23, 24; 45:8, 12, 18, 19, 22; 46:11; 47:1; 48:13; 20; 49:6, 8, 12, 13, 19, 23; 51:6 [x 2], 13, 16, 23; 52:10; 53:2, 8; 54:5, 9; 55:9, 10.

twenty other related terms, total two hundred words in these chapters that refer to the aspects of the physical world.

A significant number of terms for the physical world share a close semantic relationship to *midbār* (Isa 40:3; 41:18–19; 42:11; 43:19–20; 50:2; 51:3), referring to "wild" areas considered unsuitable for agriculture or difficult to cultivate.[23] Less common than *midbār* but closely related are *ḥorbâ* (44:26; 48:21; 49:19; 51:3; 52:9; 58:12) and *ʿarābâ* (40:3; 41:19; 44:4; 51:3), both of which are associated with the scarcity of water (Kaiser 1982). This is true for other terms in the same semantic field as well: *yĕšimôn* (43:19–20), *ṣiyyâ* (41:18; 53:2), *yabbāšâ*, and *ṣāmēʾ* (44:3).

In the case of terrain related to mountains and hills, the common term *har* (Isa 40:4, 9, 12; 41:15; 42:11, 15; 44:23; 49:11, 13; 52:7; 54:10; 55:12) and terms in its semantic field are associated with spaces either difficult to traverse or cultivate due to their ruggedness. The closely related term *gibʿâ* only appears together with *har* as a merism (40:4, 12; 41:15; 42:15; 54:10; 55:12). These locations, which celebrate Yahweh with the rest of creation (44:23; 49:13; 55:12), are used in metaphors for judgment (41:15; 42:15) or Yahweh's faithfulness (54:10). Other terms for uneven or rugged terrain are most often described as sites of potential transformation (49:11). This is evident in the idea expressed in 40:4 of leveling out uneven land by raising up *gayʾ* and flattening out *ʿāqōb* and *reqes*. In a similar fashion, *šəpāyîm* are transformed with water (41:18) or become a site for pasture (49:9), and *maʿăqaššim* are leveled out (42:16). When spaces such as these are transformed into something more arable, the texts typically refer to *śādê* (40:6; 43:20; 55:12), *biqʿâ* (40:4; 41:18), *mišôr* (42:16), and the somewhat less tame *yaʿar* (44:14; 44:23; Mulder 1982).

The frequency of the term *māyîm* constitutes a significant *leitmotif* in these chapters with nineteen appearances, sometimes generally referring to bodies of water (Isa 40:12; 40:18; 43:2, 16, 20; 44:3–4; 48:1, 21; 49:10; 50:2; 51:10; 54:9), other times specifically referring to water for drinking (41:17; 44:12; 55:1). Most of the references to *yam* in Deutero-Isaiah evoke the mythical aspects of both creation and Reed

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[23] On the general significance of *midbār* and the concept of wilderness in the Hebrew Bible, see Talmon 1966, 31–63; 1984; Leal 2006; Feldt 2012, 2014.

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Sea traditions (43:16; 50:2; 51:10 [x2], 15),[24] while the others refer to it as a home for living things (42:10) or use its waves as a metaphor for vindication (48:18). In reference to a moving body of water, the most frequent term is *nahar*, as it appears in the desert (41:18; 43:19–20) or dries up (42:15; 44:27; 50:2), is crossed over by people (43:2; 47:2), or is used as a metaphor for prosperity (48:18). The terms *nōzēl* (44:3) and *môṣāʾê māyîm* (41:18) refer to water that is rained onto or channeled into dry ground. There are also references to bodies of water opening up to transform dry land, such as *agam* (41:18; 42:15) and *maʿyān* (41:18), or those that dry up, such as *mabbûʿê mayim* (49:10).

Other terms for the physical world are used in order to suggest places that are far off, such as *ʾî* (Isa 40:15; 41:1, 5; 42:4, 10, 12; 49:1; 51:5)[25] and *qəṣôt hāʾāreṣ* (40:28; 41:5, 9, 19), and there are also references to the four cardinal directions with *ṣāpôn* and *temān* (43:6; cf. 41:25; 49:12) and *mizroḥ* and *maʿrob* (43:5; 45:6; cf. 41:2, 25; 46:11) used together as a merism expressing something like "far and wide."

There are multiple references to *šāmayîm* as a part of Yahweh's creation (Isa 40:12, 22; 42:5; 44:24; 45:12; 48:13; 51:13, 16; cf. 51:6; 55:9); a co-celebrant of Yahweh with the rest of creation (44:23; 49:13); a source of information (47:13); a place of darkness (50:3);[26] and, together with *šahaq* (45:8), a source of rain (55:10). There are references to threatening weather phenomena, such as the potential for *šemeš* and *šārāb* to cause thirst (49:10), and destructive winds with *saʿārâ* (40:24; 41:16) and *rûaḥ* (41:16).

In addition to the spaces of the physical world, Deutero-Isaiah also contains references to its materiality with mention of rocks (Isa 44:8; 48:21; 51:1), dust (40:12; 41:2; 47:1; 49:23; 52:2), and clay (41:25; 45:9).

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[24] Note especially the terms *təhôm rabbâ* and *maʿămaqqê-yām* in Isaiah 51:10; see Goldingay and Payne 2006b, 233–38.

[25] In some instances, *ʾî* refers to a group of people rather than the physical world. For example, in Isaiah 42:10 the text refers separately to the landscape with the phrase *ʾîyyim wəyōšbêhem*.

[26] The term used here in Isaiah 50:3 is a *hapax legomenon* derived from *qdr*; see HALOT 2.1072. Elsewhere, there are also references to the related terms *ʾôr* (Isa 42:6, 16; 45;7; 49:6; 51:4), *ḥōšek* (42:7; 45:3, 7, 19; 47:5; 49:9), and *maḥšāk* (42:16).
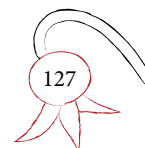
There are also multiple references to vegetation and growth, such as grass (40:6–8; 51:12), flowers (40:6–8), plants (42:15), and trees (40:20; 41:19; 44:14, 23; 55:12).[27] Additionally, there are references to non-human life: agriculture or animal husbandry, as with ʿedrō and ṭəlāʾim (40:11) and ḥayyâ (40:16), along with other animals understood as uncontrollable or hostile (40:31; 41:14; 43:20; 46:1). Human activities and social relations that interact with the physical, material world are present as well, from subsistence agriculture and animal husbandry (40:11; 49:9), to the activities of the household, to work and labor in making gardens (51:3) and quarries (51:1), woodworking, smithing and ironworking (41:7), and threshing and winnowing (41:15–16).

Isaiah 41:17–20

The text of Isaiah 41:17–20 is one of several descriptions of ecological restoration where the landscape is transformed (42:11; 43:18–21; 44:3; 48:20–22; 49:9–13, 19; 51:3). There are clear connections between this text and the transformation of the *midbār* and *ʿarābâ* in Isaiah 35, and the reference to watercourses (*yiblê-māyim*) in 44:1–4. The ecological transformations described in 41:17–20 are for the benefit of the poor and needy (*hā ʿănîyyim wəhā ʾebyônim*), who suffer due to a lack of water (41:17); they will have their needs met, as four different arid environments will be renewed by the presence of water to make them more conducive to human flourishing (Mills 2018, 115–16).[28] These hopes have traditionally been understood as provisions for exiles returning on the "way in the wilderness" to Judah from Babylonia, but there is no direct reference to this idea in the text (Blenkinsopp 2002, 228). The fourth item in the list is suggestive, as the dry land (*ʾereṣ ṣîyyâ*) is renewed by the presence of a canal of water, or a watercourse (*môṣāʾê māyim*).[29] This suggests that the author has in mind the creation of an irrigation

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[27] The three tree species in Isaiah 41:19 are difficult to identify. See Goldingay and Payne 2006a, 183–86.

[28] Further examples of the motif of provision of water are found in Isaiah 35:6; 43:19–20; 44:3–4; 48:20–21; 49:9; cf. 55:1.

[29] See DCH 5.184; HALOT 2.559. There is an additional reference to the needy being provisioned by *môṣāʾê māyim* in Isaiah 58:11.

system, thus emphasizing that the restoration of the land through agricultural means (Goldingay and Payne 2006a, 182). The ecological flourishing of a well-watered, fructified, and productive wilderness benefits the city and its residents who depend on its local agrarian economy (cf. Ps 107), and here it is explicit that the economically disadvantaged will benefit (Davis 2009, 158–59). What we find in these texts is that the expectations and hopes for restoration are ones that are extended to both human and non-human recipients, as nature terminology may also "denote conditions of existence rather than just distinct ecologies" (Blenkinsopp 2001, 44).

Isaiah 44:23; 45:8

According to Davis, the idea of blessing in the Hebrew Bible is an "ecological phenomenon" (2009, 164). In Deutero-Isaiah, the natural world is twice the subject of direct address, as "the earth itself participates in the restoration of salvation" (Joerstad 2019, 149). A short hymnic statement concludes Isaiah 44:6–23 and exhorts the heavens (*šāmayim*), the depths of the earth (*taḥtîyyôt ʾāreṣ*),[30] the mountains (*hārîm*), and forests (*yaʿar*) to shout in celebration (44:23). A similar hymnic statement concludes 45:1–7, calling for the skies to rain down and the earth to sprout up vindication (*ṣedeq*) in 45:8. In other passages, Yahweh's word is equated with rain and snow falling to the ground (44:3–4; 55:10–11), and following in his ways brings prosperity that flows like a river and success like waves of the sea (48:18–19), so that even the coastlands await divine salvation (51:5). These ecological metaphors do more than just express theological concepts, as the question of a city's righteousness "is a question of who controls the land" (Davis 2009, 156) and enjoys access to its bounty. Just as the celebration of hope results in the natural order breaking out in song (42:10–12; 44:23; 49:13; cf. 54:1; Marlow 2022, 126), so also do the ruins of Jerusalem break out into joyful shouts (52:9).

If blessing is an ecological phenomenon, then we can see that Deutero-Isaiah understands its opposite in ecological terms as well. In

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[30] This construction can be taken as a reference to the underworld; see Goldingay and Payne 2006a, 365–66.

the same way that "positive action is expressed in terms of ecological transformation and the renewal of nature," the inverse is true, as "destructive power, demonstrations of power to intervene decisively in the political arena, is expressed in the language of ecological degradation" (Blenkinsopp 2002, 317; see also 182). So, the imagery of 41:17–20 is reversed in 42:15 as mountains and hills are scorched; rivers and marshes are dried up (42:15); grass withers and flowers fade when Yahweh's breath blows on them (40:7); the islands look on in fear and the earth trembles from end to end (51:12); mountains are threshed into dust; and the hills are reduced to chaff, winnowed, carried off, and scattered (41:15–16). In contrast, to take but one example from the Isaian tradition, we never find in Isaiah 40–55 a description of ecological degradation combined with the destruction of human-designed space like the one in 2:14–15 that describes the "day of Yahweh" coming against the mountains and hills as well as every "tower" (*migdāl*) and "wall" (*ḥômâ*). The rhetorical power of these warnings in Deutero-Isaiah comes from their assumption that the land is valuable and susceptible to degradation.
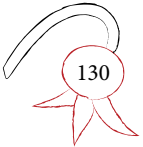
Isaiah 51:1–8

The interrelationship between city and nature is made even more explicit, for example, as in the very interesting reference to a version of the Eden myth in Isaiah 51:3.[31] Here, Jerusalem's ruins are "comforted" (*nḥm*) as "her wilderness" (*midbārah*) and "her desert" (ʿ*arbātah*) are likened to idyllic gardens. These are unique suffixed forms (Goldingay and Payne 2006b, 225), but they are related to other texts throughout Isaiah that depict the city as a rewilded space. These descriptions of the city are not necessarily negative; several use a wilderness theme to describe the destroyed city as a "rural utopia" where "a just and equitable social order" may emerge (14:17; 27:10; 64:9; Blenkinsopp 2001, 43),

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[31] A similar idea is evident in Isaiah 62:4, where the text's description of the restoration of Zion includes her land becoming "espoused," leaving the reader with "the impression that city and land are somehow conflated in the writer's mind" (Blenkinsopp 2003, 237). Several references to Eden emerge in the post-destruction period; see Ezekiel 28:11–19; 31:8–9, 16, 18; 36:35; Joel 2:3; Goldingay 2005, 423.

or describe it as a locus for animals to graze as a "'pivot point' through which to express their hope that restoration would ultimately follow from the wreckage of historical disaster" (5:17; 17:2; 27:10; 32:14; Stulac 2019, 688). It is often unrecognized in the modern West that practices of urban agriculture and animal husbandry have an extensive history beginning with the very first cities (Davis 2009, 160–63, esp. 161). The positive transformations of these wild spaces in 51:3 into Eden and Yahweh's garden (*gan-yhwh*)[32] suggest a hopeful view of human interaction with the landscape. By evoking the site of ruptures between humanity and the land, the restorative transformation of the wilderness into Eden suggests "the healing of the relationship between the city and countryside" (Davis 2009, 170).[33] Gardens are spaces where human design and natural forces are balanced together, "a material site which is boundaried and under control while also enlivened by the elemental forces of nature" (Mills 2018, 118). While urban spaces are not seen to be free from natural life, the landscape is not seen to be free from all human activity.

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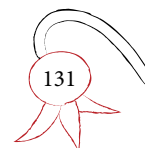
Cultural Devastation

Both the Crow Indians and the ancient Judeans experienced cultural devastation following military defeats at the hands of an expansionist empire and subsequent deportations from their ancestral territory. Though they were numerous and strong as a tribe in the early nineteenth century, the Crow were surrounded in their hunting grounds in what is modern-day Montana and Wyoming by enemy tribes, namely, the Sioux, Cheyenne, Arapaho, and Blackfeet. The westward movement of the Sioux, the most bitter enemy of the Crow, brought severe fighting, which made it necessary for the Crow to side with the United States in fighting against them.[34] Despite a succession of treaties with

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[32] The only other instance of this construct is in Genesis 13:10 as a part of a description of a verdant, "well-watered" landscape.

[33] See also Davis 2006.

[34] White 1978, 319–21, cited in Lear 2006, 22–23.

the United States government, and military victories against the Sioux, Crow territory was severely diminished—from 33 million acres in 1851 to 2 million acres in 1882—and by 1884 the Crow had relocated to a reservation. After a failed rebellion was put down by the United States in 1887, traditional Crow life had effectively ended (Lear 2006, 21–31).

In recollections gathered by his biographer Frank B. Linderman, Plenty Coups refused to discuss life for the Crow on the reservation, simply saying that "when the buffalo went away the hearts of my people fell to the ground, and they could not lift them up again. After this nothing happened."[35] Lear focuses his attention on Plenty Coups's insistence that "nothing else happened" once "the buffalo went away." There are multiple ways one can explain what Plenty Coups may have meant by this statement, but Lear sees a profound "insight into the structure of temporality" where there is "a genuine possibility of happenings' breaking down" (2006, 5–6). In other words, as the traditional Crow way of life ended, so also did the very framework within which events "had traditionally been counted as happening" (2006, 9). Here, Lear refers to the work of Marshall Sahlins to emphasize how events acquire significance *only* through cultural schema; "an event becomes such as it is interpreted" (Sahlins 1985, xiv). If the schema itself within which events happen breaks down, then there is no longer a way to "locate 'happenings' in an explanatory and meaning-filled context" (Lear 2006, 158n7).[36] In this interpretation, Lear can understand Plenty Coups's claim that "nothing else happened" to be a radical statement about the meaning in human culture. There exists a possibility for all of us that "the field of possibilities in which all human endeavors gain meaning" (Lear 2006, 7) can be lost.

All of the texts of the exilic period, including Deutero-Isaiah, are variously "coming to terms with a failed history, ending in near-terminal disaster," and several grapple with the loss of a cultural scheme with

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[35] Linderman, 1962, 308–9, cited in Lear 2006, 2.

[36] Lear notes how this is very similar to Ludwig Wittgenstein's idea that forms of life give meaning to concepts. See Wittgenstein 1958; Lear 2006, 162–63n40.

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which to interpret events (Blenkinsopp 2002, 105).[37] One salient example is Psalm 137, which describes the exiled community weeping by the rivers of Babylon. Here, the exiles are mocked by their captors, who are goading them to sing "one of the songs of Zion" (137:3), but the following stanza in 137:4–6 asks how it could be possible to do so in a foreign land. Jerusalem remains in the mind of the poet, who refuses to lose his memory of the city and affirms its importance above any other joy he might find, but the only hope he has is for revenge (137:7–9). The destruction of the Temple was "a classical case of social anomie" (Hanson 1987, 489), and its loss, together with the monarchy, brought the end of "a millennial tradition, which had to be rethought with the loss of everything that world signified" (Landy 2020, 398).[38] This is not unlike the way that scholarship in the field of trauma studies explains these experiences as a "confrontation with an event that, in its unexpectedness or horror, cannot be placed within the schemes of prior knowledge" (Caruth 1996, 153).[39] There is an absence of descriptions of the destruction of Jerusalem—"an anticlimax in the prophetic book" (Poulsen 2020, 272)—or of actual life in Babylonian exile—a "history that has no place" (Carr 2014, 75). Deutero-Isaiah refers to the despair brought on by these events, as texts question Yahweh's silence (42:14), his hiddenness or forgetfulness (40:27), and his casting off of his people (41:9). With language that directly echoes Lamentations 5:20, personified Zion wonders in Isaiah 49:14–15 if Yahweh has abandoned (ʿzb) and forgotten (škḥ) her (Tiemeyer 2011, 353–54). At the conclusion of Lamentations, the text asks why Yahweh has completely forgotten and forsaken his people; there is one final plea for restoration, for the situation to return to as it was in the "days as of old," but Yahweh's rejection and anger seem to make this hope impossible (Lam 5:19–22).[40]

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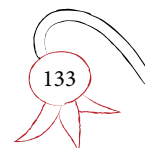
[37] It should be stressed, as Najman (2014, 3) does in her use of Lear, that these descriptions pertain to the *tradition* of the Exile, rather than the historical realities of the period. See also Barstad 1996, 23; 2008, 97.

[38] See also Halvorson-Taylor 2011; Poulsen 2019.

[39] See Carr 2014, 74–75.

[40] Here Norman Gottwald's interpretation of Lamentations 5:19–22 is helpful, as he understands this plea to "impl[y] at the very least a return of national freedom

There are similar sentiments elsewhere in texts from this period: the faithful wonder whether Yahweh will hide himself forever (Ps 89:46); some question whether Yahweh is dispassionate about or aloof from the fate of his people (Ezek 18:2, 25); and those who remained devoted to Yahweh are asked: "Where is your god?" (Ps 42:4; 115:2).

"Radical Hope" in Deutero-Isaiah

According to Lear, the core of "radical hope" consists of a commitment "to the bare idea *that something good will emerge*" (2006, 94). In his recollections of his youth, Plenty Coups tells of a spirit-dream that fore-warned him of the coming disasters for the Crow and the departure of the buffalo, and Lear interprets the dream as a form of ethical advice "designed to help him survive the cataclysmic rupture that is about to occur" (2006, 80). Though traditional ethics were facing collapse, Lear describes how Plenty Coups resisted a Kierkegaardian "teleological suspension of the ethical" and remained committed to "a goodness that transcends one's current understanding of the good" (2006, 92). This commitment to a transcendent form of goodness—in Plenty Coups's case, a religious form of commitment to God—is what constitutes "radical hope":

> What makes this hope *radical* is that it is directed toward a future goodness that transcends the current ability to understand what it is. Radical hope anticipates a good for which those who have the hope as yet lack the appropriate concepts with which to understand it.[41]

The good that is hoped for does not necessarily take on traditional form; in Plenty Coups's case, it requires "a creative maker of meaning-

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under king and priesthood … [since] it was impossible to think of a bright future without the reconstruction of those ancient and venerated forms through which God made his will and goodness known" (1962, 110–11). This hope is faintly present, but it is unlike the "radical hope" discussed by Lear since it is only oriented toward a return back to a previous way of life.

[41] Lear 2006, 103.

ful space" who is able to "take up the Crow past and—rather than use it for nostalgia or ersatz mimesis—project it into vibrant new ways for the Crow to live and to be" (Lear 2006, 51). For the Crow, this meant a new way of planting a coup stick, a ritual object carried by clan leaders that, when planted in the ground during battle, would mark a boundary that Crow warriors would defend to their death (Lear 2006, 13–14). Representing Native American tribes in a ceremony to establish the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier at Arlington National Cemetery in 1921, Plenty Coups stepped forward to the sarcophagus and laid upon it his coup stick and warbonnet—an act Lear interprets as burying them, "marking the end of a way of life in which the coup-stick and warbonnet had integral roles" (2006, 33). For Deutero-Isaiah, the use of prophetic speech forms is a similar kind of creative poetic response to a situation of crisis; the loss of a native monarchy "caused drastic changes in prophetic agency" as scribal forms of prophecy emerged in the exilic and postexilic periods.[42]

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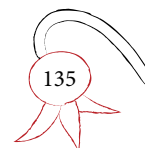
Isaiah 43:16–21

The text of Isaiah 43:16–21 in particular closely parallels Plenty Coups's hopeful reinterpretation of his tradition. A messenger formula in 43:16–17 introduces the unit, which gives an instruction not to remember former or old things (*riʾšōnôt wəqadmōnîyyôt*) because Yahweh says in 43:18–19 that he will do "something new" (*ḥădāšâ*). Five other texts in Deutero-Isaiah refer to *riʾšōnôt* (41:22; 42:9; 43:9; 46:9; 48:3), but given the description of ways through water, horses, chariots, and armies in 43:16–17,[43] the likely referent of the *riʾšōnôt* and *qadmōnîyyôt* in 43:18 is the victory at the Sea of Reeds. Instead of remembering this salvific tradition, the prophet announces something new with the ecological transformation of the desert (*yĕšimôn*) and the wilderness (*midbār*) with water (43:20). The text sets the honor of wild animals and the praise of the people in parallel as they celebrate the revival of the landscape. The reference to wild beasts, jackals, and ostriches evokes the "grazing-space *topos*" described by Stulac (5:17; 17:2; 27:10; 32:14), a

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[42] Nissinen 2017, 351. See also Sanders 2017.

[43] Cf. Exodus 14:4, 6, 7, 9, 17, 18, 23, 26, 28; 15:1, 4, 10, 19, 21.

polyvalent "continuum of interrelated concepts familiar to a premodern, agrarian society" where the landscape is both rewilded and redomesticated with the presence of animal life; it is "one expression of a worldview that perceives a permeable membrane between human agricultures and the larger panoply of creation in which those agricultures operate" (Stulac 2019, 688–89).[44]

Isaiah 55:1–13

The most striking way in which Deutero-Isaiah does not attend to "former things" is the way it passes over both the monarchy and the Temple as it articulates its hopes for the future. This is made clear in Isaiah 55:1–13, where hope is not expressed through these traditional institutional forms. In relation to the monarchy, Deutero-Isaiah is unlike Isaiah 1–39 in that there is almost no attention paid to David or the Davidic line.[45] The text does not look to the monarchy as a vehicle for its hope for the future, instead shifting the typical expectations placed on the monarch to other parties. First, by transferring titles usually associated with the Davidic line onto the Persian king Cyrus, referring to him as Yahweh's "servant" (*ʿebed*), "shepherd" (*rōʿê*),[46] and famously as his "anointed" (*mašiaḥ*) in 45:1, Deutero-Isaiah asserts that "the Davidic monarch has been superseded" and "Zion is displaced as the cosmic centre" (Landy 2023, 350). This constitutes a major ideological shift with a complete transfer of political legitimacy from the Davidic monarchy to the Achaemenids (Fried 2002). Not only would this supportive stance toward Persia take advantage of the empire's tolerance of local cults, it also would allow for an expression of a "radical" vision of religion separate from "nationality and territory," even hinting at a future

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[44] See Marlow 2022, 131.

[45] Roberts 1982, 140; Schmid 2002, 185–87; Blenkinsopp 2014, 134. Though there is no mention of David or the Davidic line, the description of the servant figure in Isaiah 42:1–4 does include language typically associated with the king, primarily the responsibility of ensuring social justice (Williamson 2020, 290).

[46] David is referred to as Yahweh's servant (2 Sam 3:18; 1 Kgs 8:24–26; 2 Kgs 19:34; Jer 33:21–22, 26; Ezek 34:23; 37:24) and shepherd (2 Sam 5:2 = 1 Chr 11:2; Ezek 34:23; 37:24; Ps 78:71–72; Berges 2014; Blenkinsopp 2014, 139).

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apart from "the apparatus of an independent state system" (Blenkinsopp 2014, 143). Second, the text's only direct reference to David in 55:3 offers a "radically new perspective" on the monarchy where the promise of an everlasting covenant and steadfast love with David is democratized and given to the people.[47] Though the *hôy* introduction in 55:1 does not specify an audience, the use of plural forms in 55:3 makes it clear that the text collectivizes this formerly royal promise, likely including the primary addressees of Jacob/Israel in Isaiah 40–48 and Zion in Isaiah 49–55 (Williamson 2020, 288). Of primary significance for an agrarian reading is the way this covenant with the people is embedded in a text that is critical of commercialism and the marketplace, as the hungry and thirsty in 55:1–2 are assured that they will have plenty to eat and drink in a gift economy without the need of money (Altmann 2016, 303; see also 201–5). By assuring its audience that all will have access to food without the potential for economic exploitation, the text constitutes a critique of "a greedy urban-dominated agriculture that is oblivious to rural or common people" (Davis 2009, 174). Thus, the democratization of the Davidic promise should be understood to include a rejection of the urban expropriation of wealth from the hinterland.

Yahweh's covenant with the people is followed by one final reprise of the theme of natural renewal in Isaiah 55:6–13. A short exhortation in 55:6–7 calls for the text's audience to seek and call to Yahweh. These acts are moral or ethical in nature, not unlike the common instruction to listen and take heed in 55:3. While the act of seeking (*drš*) after Yahweh may refer to visiting a sanctuary or consulting a medium for an oracle, in 55:6 it has the meaning of a prayerful attitude responsive to Yahweh's instruction (Blenkinsopp 2002, 371), and is a part of what Ulrich Berges has called the "individualization of exile" (2019, 66–71) in the form of an ethical commitment to care for those in need. The ensuing text in 55:8–13 contains a short speech from Yahweh in 55:8–11 and a final recapitulation of Deutero-Isaiah's main themes of return from exile and the restoration of the land in 55:12–13. The efficacy of

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[47] Miller 2010, 224; Williamson 2020, 288. A majority of recent opinion holds that the phrase *ḥasde dāwid* refers to David as the recipient of Yahweh's steadfast love (Williamson 2020, 287–89).
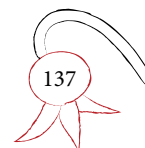
Yahweh's word is likened to the fertility brought to the earth by rains and snow (55:10–11), and the natural world joins in on the celebration of joy and security brought about by Yahweh's covenant with the people as the mountains and hills shout and the trees of the field clap their hands (55:12; see 44:23). As the culminating section of Deutero-Isaiah, it is notable that neither the faithful response of those who listen to and seek after Yahweh (55:3, 6) nor the joyful anticipation of Yahweh's provision (55:10–11, 12–13) refer to the Temple or cult at all. This fits with the generally "anti-priestly, and especially anti-Temple" outlook of Deutero-Isaiah, where the text shows "no practical interest at all in the restoration of the cult" aside from one reference to the return of the Temple vessels in 52:11–12 (Lipton 2009, 82–83). Additionally, the one isolated reference to the Temple in 44:28, found with the first mention of Cyrus in the text and his rebuilding of Jerusalem, seems primarily to have political rather than religious significance, simply referring to "a broader imperial policy of temple refoundations" (Landy 2023, 350). Instead of an assembled gathering in the central sanctuary (e.g., 56:7), a fertile, rejoicing landscape is the image of Yahweh's provision. The descriptions of cypress and myrtle replacing brier and nettle in 55:13 should be understood as occurring in the land of Judah, like the description of Zion being transformed into a garden in 51:3, but not in order to make it into "a kind of nature preserve or memorial park" (Blenkinsopp 2002, 373). It is worth pointing out that the abundant food promised in 55:1–2 comes from agricultural processes in 55:10; the vegetation of the earth brings seed used for sowing, and it is human labor that transforms its harvest into bread for eating. Thus, the fertile landscape described here is a cultivated and productive one. The same text that democratizes the Davidic promise locates Yahweh's provision in agricultural activity on the land and an ethical commitment to a just distribution of its yield rather than exploitation for profit or gain. Rather than extol the traditional institutional guarantors of Yahweh's blessing (i.e., monarchy and Temple), the hopes expressed by Deutero-Isaiah envision an agrarian vision of flourishing with a new kind of social formation built around the central recognition of land's importance.

Conclusion

In this article, I have read Deutero-Isaiah's hopeful response to cultural disaster alongside that of Plenty Coups. Has this brought out new meaning in Deutero-Isaiah? Are the descriptions of disaster in Deutero-Isaiah and similar texts to be understood as a collapse of cultural meaning, or what Lear refers to as an end of happenings? It would seem that the answer hangs on another question—*for whom?* Whether author or audience, it is historically correct to say that our texts originate in elite circles whose interests do not necessarily include those of non-elites. The traditions concerning Zion's inviolability, and the deep symbolic resonances it creates between human and divine kingship, serve to legitimate a social order. So, the loss of the two central institutions of Judean society would foreclose different sets of possibilities for different social groups. For elite circles connected to the cultic or royal establishment, who are "the human representations of the praised sign," the destruction of the symbol leads to the collapse of its symbolic universe, a collapse of a culturally ordered way of life (Miller 2010, 232). It is more difficult to say that the devastation for "official" Israelite culture (religion) would also extend to the "family" culture (or religion) of non-elites.[48] Yet, it seems clear that the loss of "established political and cultic hierarchies as immutable institutions" (Miller 2010, 230–33) would lead to changes in the social order itself.

Using Lear's account as a guide, we can see several major points of similarity between our two sources. Like the Crow, the Judeans suffered through an experience of cultural devastation that brought about the end of their traditional ways of life. Like the Crow, Deutero-Isaiah responded to this crisis through a traditional form of divine mediation—the dream-vision of the Crow and the prophetic speech of ancient Israel. Both sought to ensure the survival of their people through collaboration with empire rather than resistance to it. Finally, like the

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[48] Albertz and Schmitt assert that "the complete absence of official religious traditions in personal names testifies that family religion existed and functioned independently of Israel's history of national salvation and was uninfluenced by it" (2012, 335); see also Albertz 1978, 49–77.

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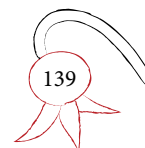
Crow, Deutero-Isaiah renounced the traditional means through which territorial boundaries were maintained. For the Crow, this meant the "burial" of the coup-stick; for Deutero-Isaiah, this meant the rejection of the central institutions of monarchy and Temple. Deutero-Isaiah instead advances the claim that the land is the guarantor of a good life for Yahweh's people, and that it has "the power to contribute to conditions that make righteous life and salvation available to humans" (Joerstad 2019, 150).

Deutero-Isaiah's hope for the deportees' return to Judah is not a hope for a *return to normal*. A traditional ideology of Zion, together with its attendant social forms, is no longer viable after the ruptures of exile. The prophet recognizes that the cultural schema has broken down and now anticipates "a future goodness that transcends the current ability to understand what it is." What ultimately tips the scales and makes Deutero-Isaiah's hope for the landscape *radical* in Lear's terms is that it directly confronts the impossibility that Yahweh's goodness could be found "without the reconstruction of those ancient and venerated forms" (Albertz 2003, 441–43) of monarchy and Temple. By democratizing the royal promise (Isa 55:3), the prophet offers a hopeful solution to the problem caused by the end of the Davidic line: a vision of human flourishing deeply intertwined with the land, one "where what happens in the fields is inseparable from what happens in cities and towns" (Tull Willey 2009, 27). It is, of course, a challenge to identify the precise social makeup of the community to whom the Davidic promise is extended. Within the latter sections of Isaiah, there are clear indications of social divisions, indicating that the process of taking up these new social forms was not straightforward.[49] What is clear, though, is that the prophet affirms in hope that the good will include Zion, with the land as an equal participant and recipient of that good as well.

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[49] As Mark Brett (2020, 627–31) observes, both John Kessler (2006) and Francesca Stavrakopoulou (2010, 17, 73, 140) use a postcolonial approach to interpret these conflicts between repatriating elites ("colonizers") and the indigenous population.

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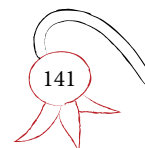
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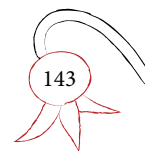
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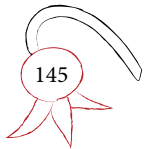
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