

# “Written in the book that I prophesied publicly”

## *The Discernment of Apocalyptic Wisdom According to the Ascension of Isaiah*

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It is a favorite pastime among members of our guild to explore the relationship of prophecy, apocalyptic, and wisdom. The text I will be examining today, a Christian work from the turn of the second century called the *Ascension of Isaiah*,<sup>1</sup> offers all three of these. The Isaiah of the title is the famous prophet of the eighth century BCE, and his prophetic vocation is key to the text’s portrayal of him. Making the case for apocalyptic is also easy: the second half of the text recounts a heavenly journey by Isaiah, in which he sees the future activities of the being who will be called Jesus Christ. Today’s challenge will be to concentrate on wisdom features of the text. My bridge to seeing the text as sapiential will be its apocalyptic inflection of Isaiah’s life and canonical prophecies.

I will start with some general remarks about Jewish wisdom practices in this period. Next I will examine the *Ascension of Isaiah* for indications of sapiential concerns and practices, especially in terms of scriptural interpretation. Finally I will look in detail at what the *Ascension of Isaiah* does with the throne vision in the sixth chapter of canonical

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<sup>1</sup> In the scholarly literature, *Asc. Isa.* 1–5 is sometimes called the *Martyrdom of Isaiah* and *Asc. Isa.* 6–11 the *Ascension of Isaiah* or the *Vision of Isaiah*, but I follow recent usage in calling the whole by the name the *Ascension of Isaiah*. This is the choice made, for example, in the new critical edition and commentary: Paolo Bettolo et al., eds., *Ascensio Isaiae: Textus* (CCSA 7; Turnhout: Brepols, 1995) and Enrico Norelli, ed., *Ascensio Isaiae: Commentarius* (CCSA 8; Turnhout: Brepols, 1995; the commentary itself is by Norelli). Note that one of the convenient (though now slightly outdated) English translations of the text uses the double form of the title: “Martyrdom and Ascension of Isaiah,” translated and introduced by M. A. Knibb (*OTP* 2:143–176). Another convenient English translation is located in C. Detlef G. Müller, “The Ascension of Isaiah,” *New Testament Apocrypha* (ed. Wilhelm Schneemelcher; trans. R. McL. Wilson; 2 vols.; Louisville, Ky.: Westminster/John Knox, 1992), 2:603–620. It should be realized that Knibb’s and Müller’s introductions, translations, and notes predate the new critical edition and most of the Italian research that accompanied its development. Translations of the *Asc. Isa.* here are my own, though heavily influenced by Knibb’s English translation and the Italian translations of the versions in *Ascensio Isaiae: Textus*.

Isaiah. I should note that I am working with the current scholarly consensus about the *Ascension of Isaiah*, namely, that it was written in Greek (although it survives mainly in other versions) and can be regarded as a unified or close-to-unified composition in its longer recension, chs. 1–11.<sup>2</sup>

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It has been recognized for some time now, through the efforts of John Collins and George Nickelsburg among others, that Jewish wisdom texts of the Hellenistic and early Roman period show marked differences of content and emphasis from those of an earlier era.<sup>3</sup>

The wisdom books that we know from the Writings subdivision of the Hebrew Bible had distilled their knowledge from the experience of generations of past sages, had been remarkably abstemious with explicit allusions to God or Torah, and had characterized blessed reward in this-worldly terms of long life, wealth, and progeny. In the ensuing centuries, Jewish texts in wisdom genres do not put experiential, mundane wisdom aside,

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<sup>2</sup> See Catherine Anne Playoust, “Lifted Up From the Earth: The Ascension of Jesus and the Heavenly Ascents of Early Christians” (Th.D. diss., Harvard Divinity School, 2006), section “On Studying the Longer Recension” in the chapter on the *Ascension of Isaiah*. The following notable recent studies of the *Ascension of Isaiah* include theories about its composition history and recensions: Antonio Acerbi, *Serra Lignea: Studi sulla Fortuna della Ascensione di Isaia* (Rome: A.V.E., 1984); Antonio Acerbi, *L’Ascensione di Isaia: Cristologia e profetismo in Siria nei primi decenni del II secolo* (Studia Patristica Mediolanensia 17; 2d ed.; Milan: Vita e Pensiero, 1989); Richard Bauckham, “The Ascension of Isaiah: Genre, Unity and Date,” in *The Fate of the Dead: Studies on the Jewish & Christian Apocalypses* (NovTSup 93; Leiden: Brill, 1998), 363–390; Jonathan Knight, *Disciples of the Beloved One: The Christology, Social Setting and Theological Context of the Ascension of Isaiah* (JSPSup 18; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996); Norelli, ed., *Ascensio Isaiae: Commentarius*; Enrico Norelli, *L’Ascensione di Isaia: Studi su un apocrifo al crocevia dei cristianesimi* (Origini NS 1; Bologna: EDB, 1994); Mauro Pesce, ed., *Isaia, il Diletto e la Chiesa: Visione ed esegesi profetica cristiano-primitiva nell’Ascensione di Isaia: Atti del Convegno di Roma, 9–10 aprile 1981* (TRSR 20; Brescia: Paideia, 1983).

<sup>3</sup> Two articles from the early 1990s are particularly important here. John J. Collins, “Wisdom, Apocalypticism, and Generic Compatibility,” in *In Search of Wisdom: Essays in Memory of John G. Gammie* (ed. Leo G. Perdue et al.; Louisville: WJK, 1993), 165–185; repr. in John J. Collins, *Seers, Sybils and Sages in Hellenistic-Roman Judaism* (JSJSup 54; Leiden: Brill, 1997), 385–404. (The other articles in the final section of *Seers, Sybils and Sages* are also pertinent.) George W. E. Nickelsburg, “Wisdom and Apocalypticism in Early Judaism: Some Points for Discussion” [1994, revised], in *Conflicted Boundaries in Wisdom and Apocalypticism* (ed. Benjamin G. Wright III & Lawrence M. Wills; SBLSymS 35; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2005), 17–37. Tanzer draws on Collins’s article in her response to Nickelsburg’s, and Nickelsburg replies in turn. Sarah J. Tanzer, “Response to George Nickelsburg, ‘Wisdom and Apocalypticism in Early Judaism’” [1994, revised], in *George W. E. Nickelsburg in Perspective: An Ongoing Dialogue of Learning* (ed. J. Neusner & A. J. Avery-Peck; 2 vols.; Leiden: Brill, 2003), 1:288–299; repr. in *Conflicted Boundaries*, 39–49. George W. E. Nickelsburg, “Response to Sarah Tanzer” [2003], in *George W. E. Nickelsburg in Perspective*, 1:300–303; repr. in *Conflicted Boundaries*, 51–54.

but they develop an interest in directly revealed wisdom (whether from dreams, divination, visits of a heavenly messenger, or heavenly ascents by a human), they pay greater attention to Israelite history and Scriptures, and they express a belief in a coming age in which justice will be dispensed by God.

Thus wisdom texts can support the older and the newer ways of thinking about revelation, the earth, the heavens, and the future. Having demonstrated this in a 1993 article, Collins concludes that “the forms of wisdom speech are adaptable, and may be used in the service of more than one world-view.”<sup>4</sup> Since the particular thrust of his article is that an apocalyptic worldview is compatible with wisdom genres, which has been a point of contention in discussions of Q scholarship, it is worth noting that John Kloppenborg Verbin takes a similar approach in his book *Excavating Q*; his aim is to investigate wisdom strictly in terms of generic and formal features, not content, so that he does not regard apocalyptic-flavored wisdom as a contradiction in terms.<sup>5</sup>

It was an important advance to free the wisdom genre from the bounds of the worldview shown in Hebrew Bible sapiential texts, and yet it raises the question of whether there is, after all, a meta-worldview that unifies wisdom literature. I would suggest that there is, and it comes in the form of an epistemological presupposition. The production and use of wisdom literature necessarily assume that the cosmos is predictable enough for the acquisition of wisdom to be advantageous, that seeking wisdom has some chance of success, and that sharing the acquired wisdom with like-minded people is a worthwhile activity. Under the wide umbrella of this sapiential meta-worldview, various

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<sup>4</sup> Collins, “Wisdom, Apocalypticism, and Generic Compatibility,” 401.

<sup>5</sup> John S. Kloppenborg Verbin, *Excavating Q: The History and Setting of the Sayings Gospel* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), esp. 379–388. On 145–146 n. 61 (see also 150–151), he states that Collins’ critique (at the end of “Wisdom, Apocalypticism, and Generic Compatibility”) of Kloppenborg’s earlier work on redactional layers in Q arises from a misunderstanding of his methodology, which in fact does not presume that wisdom and apocalyptic are incompatible.

sets of cosmologies, philosophies, and theologies can reside. Moreover, one can start to recognize this sapiential stance also in works whose genre is best labeled in other ways.

Notable among these texts that are broadly sapiential without being strictly in a wisdom genre are apocalypses.<sup>6</sup> In the apocalyptic genre, as it is currently understood, a human receives a revelation of otherworldly realities, whether about the unfolding of history or the contents of the wider cosmos or both, and transmits the revealed knowledge for the benefit of others.<sup>7</sup> The continued existence of an apocalyptic text, at least in the short term, requires its preservers to accept the content of the revelation as genuine (whether or not the means of its receipt is taken literally) and to value it as relevant to their lives. Thus the sapiential meta-worldview is operative: it is necessarily assumed that some wisdom of importance has been successfully acquired and transmitted.

If persons associated with sapiential materials can be characterized by their confidence in getting and transmitting wisdom, attention should be turned to the social practices that sustain their activities. In the case of the *Ascension of Isaiah*, two such social practices have attracted scholarly attention. The first is the cultivation of ascent techniques, that is, the attempt to experience a heavenly journey like Isaiah is said to have made in this text. The revelation thereby achieved would be a kind of mantic wisdom. The *Ascension of Isaiah* provides a remarkably detailed narration of Isaiah's entry into an ecstatic state prior to his ascent (*Asc. Isa.* 6), suggesting that the author or authors of the text had at least indirect knowledge of what such ecstasies looked like from the outside. So it may well be that those associated with the *Ascension of Isaiah* considered

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<sup>6</sup> Nickelsburg, "Wisdom and Apocalypticism in Early Judaism: Some Points for Discussion," 21–22 (with older bibliography at 22 n. 11), 24–26. John J. Collins, "Cosmos and Salvation: Jewish Wisdom and Apocalypticism in the Hellenistic Age," *HR* 17 (1977): 121–142 [with a slightly different title]; repr. in *Seers, Sybils and Sages*, 317–338, esp. 330–337.

<sup>7</sup> Here I draw on the well-known definition of the apocalyptic genre from *Semeia* 14 (1979), as discussed in John J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination: An Introduction to Jewish Apocalyptic Literature* (2nd ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 4–9.

themselves to be practicing mystical ascents and acquiring wisdom through that means. However, I view this only as a possibility, unlike some scholars of the text. I have argued in previous work against the notion that they believed mystical ascents were necessary to salvation.<sup>8</sup> Notwithstanding this, they would probably have welcomed such ascents, if they occurred, as sources for wisdom.

The other sapiential practice that scholars have seen as relevant to the *Ascension of Isaiah* is scriptural interpretation. Nickelsburg has drawn attention to two ways in which texts from this period use Scripture as a source of wisdom. Comparing Sirach, an indisputably sapiential work, with *I Enoch*, a collection of apocalypses which can be called sapiential in the broader sense, he writes:

For Ben Sira, the scribe looks for enlightenment in the tradition, which for him includes the Torah, the prophets, and the writings and traditions of the wise. Here the Enochic authors part company with him. Although, in fact, they draw on Scripture at many points, they do not acknowledge the fact. Instead they claim to have received a special revelation, through dreams, visions, and heavenly journeys. They assert that this is an ancient revelation (to Enoch), but, in fact, it is new revelation. Scripture is not sufficient.<sup>9</sup>

Remarkably, the *Ascension of Isaiah* finds a way to combine these apparently contrasting techniques. Since the prophet Isaiah left a collection of prophecies to posterity, the *Ascension of Isaiah* asserts that the revelations it transmits have already been made in veiled form in what became the canonical book of Isaiah. After the character Isaiah delivers a revelation of the future from the first coming of the Lord onward, he states:

**ወጎራፋተ ራእየ ጳጳሲእ ሃዋ ጽሑፍን ጳሙንቱ ሰምሳሌ ሰቃልየ ሰዘ ጽሑፍ ውስተ መጽሓፍ ዘገሃደ ተነበይኩ ።**

And the remaining parts of the vision of the Lord, behold, they are written parabolically in my word which is written in the book that I prophesied publicly. (*Asc. Isa.* 4:20)

He mentions in particular the vision of Babylon (Isa 13) and the fourth servant song (Isa 52:13–53:12, LXX version) as places where he has written about his vision. Isaiah goes

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<sup>8</sup> Playoust, “Lifted Up From the Earth,” section “Ascents-and-Descents by Others?” in the chapter on the *Ascension of Isaiah*.

<sup>9</sup> Nickelsburg, “Response to Sarah Tanzer,” 53.

on to specify further publicly-available works in which these revelations are written (4:21–22); he lists the Psalms, Proverbs, each of the Twelve Prophets, Daniel, and “the works of the righteous Joseph” (perhaps the *Prayer of Joseph*).

On the one hand, then, the *Ascension of Isaiah*, like Sirach, encourages its readers to search the Scriptures for wisdom. On the other hand, like *I Enoch*, it offers the wisdom of a fictively old apocalyptic revelation that has scriptural support but really could only have come into existence in a later era, in this case the Early Christian period. The people behind the *Ascension of Isaiah* must surely have been engaging in extensive study of and meditation upon the Scriptures in order to generate this text. The quasi-footnotes that they put on Isaiah’s lips both invite readers to delve into the Scriptures to find even more wisdom and indicate implicitly that the producers and early users of the *Ascension of Isaiah* had been doing just that.

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Today I wish to concentrate on the *Ascension of Isaiah*’s interpretation of the opening verses of Isa 6, Isaiah’s throne vision of the Lord.<sup>10</sup> In the Septuagint, which seems to have been the version of the Scriptures used by the *Ascension of Isaiah*, this passage of canonical Isaiah begins:

εἶδον τὸν κύριον καθήμενον ἐπὶ θρόνου ὑψηλοῦ καὶ ἐπηρμένου, καὶ ὁ οἶκος τῆς  
δόξης αὐτοῦ  
I saw the Lord seated on an exalted and elevated throne, and the house was full of his  
glory (Isa 6:1 LXX)

Isaiah then describes how two seraphim are standing about the Lord, proclaiming that the Lord Sabaoth’s glory fills all the earth (Isa 6:2–3). While the *Ascension of Isaiah* does not directly quote this passage, it would strain credulity to think that its account of Isaiah’s heavenly ascent and his vision of heavenly beings has not been influenced by it.

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<sup>10</sup> This analysis draws upon several paragraphs in Playoust, “Lifted Up From the Earth,” section “The Ascension of the Beloved” in the chapter on the *Ascension of Isaiah*, and some other parts of the chapter.

Now, from a historical-critical perspective, the Lord (κύριος) in Isa 6 has to be the God of Israel, who would in time be identified by Christians as the Father of Jesus Christ. This interpretation of the passage was also known by Jews and Christians in the Early Christian period. Christians often asserted, furthermore, that the two seraphim were the Logos (i.e., the Son) and the Holy Spirit; Origen attests several times to this interpretation, and it may go back before his time.<sup>11</sup>

Scholars frequently claim that the *Ascension of Isaiah* is working with such an understanding of Isa 6. If so, the critical moment occurs in the seventh and highest heaven, when Isaiah sees the divine being who is the Father of the one who will become Jesus in the world (*Asc. Isa.* 9:37–39); the text generally calls this divine being the “Great Glory,” the “Most High,” or “the Lord.” Immediately before, Isaiah has seen the being who will become Jesus—he tends to call him “the Beloved” or “my Lord”—and the “angel of the Holy Spirit.” These two would correspond to the seraphim flanking the Lord, even if for the *Ascension of Isaiah* the Beloved is angelomorphic rather than an actual angel.<sup>12</sup>

There is just one problem. The text of the passage where Isaiah encounters the Great Glory (*Asc. Isa.* 9:37–39) is so fraught that it is doubtful whether he sees him at all. In the Ethiopic version, he does see him, but only for a moment, and he conveys no information about what he sees. In the Latin (L<sup>2</sup>) and Slavonic versions, Isaiah does not

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<sup>11</sup> Jean Daniélou, *The Theology of Jewish Christianity* (trans. & ed. John A. Baker; The Development of Christian Doctrine Before the Council of Nicaea, vol. 1; London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1964), 134–140. Darrell D. Hannah, “Isaiah’s Vision in the Ascension of Isaiah and the Early Church,” *JTS NS* 50 (1999): 80–101.

<sup>12</sup> Putative connections between the *Asc. Isa.* and this reading of Isa 6 are made for the terminology of (and the possible seeing of) the “Great Glory” and for the angelomorphic Christology. (Note that these topics are broader than just the application of Isa 6.) For examples, see Knight, *Disciples of the Beloved One*, 139–145; Loren T. Stuckenbruck, “Worship and Monotheism in the *Ascension of Isaiah*,” in *The Jewish Roots of Christological Monotheism: Papers from the St. Andrews Conference on the Historical Origins of the Worship of Jesus* (ed. Carey C. Newman, James R. Davila, & Gladys S. Lewis; JSJSup 63; Leiden: Brill, 1999), 82–86; Charles A. Gieschen, *Angelomorphic Christology: Antecedents and Early Evidence* (AGJU 42; Leiden: Brill, 1998), 229–244; Norelli, *Ascensio Isaiae: Commentarius*, 484–485, 494–496.

see God at all. Each version tells other parts of the narrative appropriately to account for this, but redactional analysis carried out by Antonio Acerbi and Enrico Norelli of the versions in these verses and elsewhere has indicated that the Ethiopic is secondary here.<sup>13</sup> Thus in its earliest recoverable form, the *Ascension of Isaiah* says that Isaiah does not see God, which means that Isa 6 cannot have been operating in the manner sketched above at this early stage.

The possibility of a human seeing God and living to tell the tale was a long-standing question for those using the Scriptures of Israel. Famously, in Exod 33:20 the Lord tells Moses that it is impossible, and yet the Hebrew text of Exod 24:9–11 offers a counter-example in the case of the Israelite elders, leading to an alteration of the latter passage in the LXX. Isa 6:1 LXX, in which Isaiah sees the Lord seated on a throne, seems to be a flagrant contradiction too, and this problem is raised in *Asc. Isa.* 3:9, where Isaiah is accused of lying about his vision because it goes against what Moses said in Exod 33:20.<sup>14</sup> The more original form of the *Ascension of Isaiah* seems to be offering a narrative-theological solution to this exegetical problem, by trading upon the ambiguity of the word κύριος (“Lord”) in Early Christian usage. Acerbi and Norelli have pointed out the prevalence of the term “Lord” or “my Lord” in the sense of the Beloved in Isaiah’s ascent-vision, and I endorse their suggestion that the more original form of the *Ascension of Isaiah* is construing the Lord whom Isaiah sees in Isa 6 as the Beloved, not the Father of the Beloved.<sup>15</sup> The existence of such an interpretation of “Lord” in Isa 6 (and in some other passages in the scriptures of Israel), as the Son instead of the Father, is

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<sup>13</sup> Acerbi, *L’Ascensione di Isaia*, 100–102 (re 7:7–8), 123–124; Norelli, *Ascensio Isaiae: Commentarius*, 496–498.

<sup>14</sup> The existence of this exegetical problem is documented for Early Judaism and Early Christianity, though in later texts; see Norelli, *Ascensio Isaiae: Commentarius*, 156–159 (with a synoptic chart of quotations).

<sup>15</sup> Acerbi, *L’Ascensione di Isaia*, 50–54, 101–102, 123–124, 183–184; Norelli, “«Il Diletto» e l’uso dei titoli cristologici nell’AI,” in idem, *L’Ascensione di Isaia*, 262–263; Norelli, *Ascensio Isaiae: Commentarius*, 484–485, 496–498.



found in John 12:41 and some other Early Christian texts.<sup>16</sup> That is, the *Ascension of Isaiah* in its more original form is finding a way for both Moses and Isaiah to be correct. On the other hand, for the Ethiopic, where Isaiah does see God, Isaiah is being portrayed as receiving an exceptional privilege that surmounts the limitation on living humans that Moses recorded.

I must admit that there are some technical problems with the details of this reconstruction of the more original form of the text, since the extant witnesses for *Asc. Isa.* 3:9 lean away from the ambiguous word “Lord” and toward “God” or the Ethiopic word for “LORD” that specifically means “God.”<sup>17</sup> However, this is not an insurmountable problem, since it is clear from Isaiah’s encounter with the Great Glory that there was a shift over time in how this feature of the text was understood.

If, in the earlier stage of the work’s history, the Lord whom Isaiah sees is the Beloved, the question remains as to whether there is a specific moment in Isaiah’s ascent-vision that corresponds to Isa 6. Norelli points, in passing, to Isaiah’s initial sight of the Beloved (9:27–32).<sup>18</sup> This is a possibility, but I wish to put forth a new interpretation: I

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<sup>16</sup> See Hannah, “Isaiah’s Vision in the Ascension of Isaiah and the Early Church,” 80–84. However, Hannah interprets Isa 6 in the *Asc. Isa.* in the “vision of God” sense just discussed.

<sup>17</sup> The Latin (L<sup>2</sup>) and Slavonic versions, in which Isaiah does not see God, are of the shorter recension (chs. 6–11) and thus do not include *Asc. Isa.* 3:9. The Ethiopic of 3:9 uses the term እግዚአብሔር (“LORD,” i.e., God) rather than እግዚእ (i.e., κύριος not explicitly in the sense of God), though this could be from κύριος or θεός, and for the Ethiopic he does indeed see God. Less encouragingly, the Latin (L<sup>1</sup>) has Moses and Isaiah talking about *Deus* (“God”) in 3:9, but perhaps L<sup>1</sup> too has shifted like the Ethiopic to having Isaiah see God. The Greek fragment, frustratingly, says θεόν for Moses’ statement but has a lacuna in Isaiah’s statement that could be filled just as easily with κύριον as θεόν (abbreviated as a nomen sacrum, in either case). If Bauckham’s theory (“The Ascension of Isaiah: Genre, Unity and Date”) of a unified composition of the *Asc. Isa.* is correct, this would mean that the longer recension had been re-read in the Lord-as-God sense at some time in the prehistory of L<sup>1</sup> and the Ethiopic. If Norelli’s theory (in various works) is correct that the first half of the *Asc. Isa.* was added to the second half, I suggest that the first half formerly understood κύριος in the sense of the Beloved rather than God more often than the extant witnesses to the longer recension suggest, since Beliar’s masquerade as the Beloved (4:2–13) goes better with claims to be the Beloved than God, although the Ethiopic has him claiming to be እግዚአብሔር not እግዚእ. (In general, the Ethiopic translator’s interpretive decisions about whether to render κύριος as እግዚአብሔር or እግዚእ are both open to debate and likely to reflect a later understanding of what κύριος meant in certain passages.) Acerbi (*L’Ascensione di Isaia*, 123–124), whose source-critical judgment that the two halves of the *Asc. Isa.* were initially independent, takes up the question of 3:9 differently, explaining the change seen in the Ethiopic as resulting from the confrontation of *Asc. Isa.* 6–11 with 3:9; that is, his theory would not require a later shift in meaning for 3:9.

<sup>18</sup> Norelli, “«Il Diletto» e l’uso dei titoli cristologici nell’AI,” 262.

propose that a better match is afforded by the final event in Isaiah’s ascent-vision, the heavenly session of the Beloved at the right of the Great Glory. After Isaiah encounters the Great Glory, he watches as the Beloved descends to earth, lives there, is crucified, descends into Sheol, rises up again, and ascends to the seventh heaven amid his worship and glorification by the angels. Next comes the time when “the Lord” (i.e., the Beloved) sits at the right of the Great Glory. This is the first occasion on which he is seated, since before his descent he was standing. His enthronement has trappings of exaltation (cf.  $\theta\rho\acute{o}\nu\omicron\upsilon\ \acute{\upsilon}\psi\eta\lambda\omicron\upsilon\tilde{\nu}$ , Isa 6:1); and the whole company of heaven is engaged in singing his glory, just as the two seraphim do in Isa 6:3. Hence the match of the Beloved’s heavenly session to the throne-vision in canonical Isaiah is very close. Moreover, the ascension of the Beloved and his enthronement at the right of God can be seen as the peak moment of Isaiah’s ascent-vision, and it is only fitting that the vision ends at that point, with the angel telling Isaiah that what he has observed is unique.<sup>19</sup>

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I have shown today how some Early Christians probed the Scriptures and their traditions about Jesus to find an exegetical solution to the apparent contradiction offered by Exod 33:20 and Isa 6:1. They offered their solution in the narrative we know as the *Ascension of Isaiah*. More generally, I have demonstrated how they performed this

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<sup>19</sup> A further advantage of the interpretation I propose here is that it discovers a unity in Isaiah’s ascent-vision. Isaiah’s visionary ascent has often seemed to scholars to have two rather distinct components. First is the revelation of the heavens he receives while ascending, culminating in the sight of at least the Beloved and the angel of the Holy Spirit, and possibly the Great Glory too. The general shape of this conforms to Jewish ascent apocalypses, and a non-Christian Jewish source for it has sometimes been postulated; see Ioan Culianu, “La *Visione di Isaia* e la tematica della *Himmelsreise*,” in Pesce, *Isaia, il Diletto e la Chiesa*, 95–116, esp. 109–111; Martha Himmelfarb, *Ascent to Heaven in Jewish and Christian Apocalypses* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 58. Such theories are discussed in Robert G. Hall, “Isaiah’s Ascent to See the Beloved: An Ancient Jewish Source for the *Ascension of Isaiah*?” *JBL* 113 (1994): 463–484. Second is the descent and ascent of the Beloved, which seems not to be closely bound to the first. It can be a struggle to interpret these together; Hall (esp. 480) does it by emphasizing heavenly travel and heavenly glory at the cost of specific interest in the Beloved, but pulls the threads together by observing how the Beloved’s ascension completes the heavenly glory by enabling the heavenly enthronement of the righteous (cf. 9:6–18). I also see the final scene as climactic, and thus unifying the ascent-vision, but I do not decenter the Beloved at all. The final scene mentions the righteous but not their enthronement, despite 9:6–18, for its concern is with the ascension, glorification, and heavenly enthronement of the Beloved (and, secondarily, the enthronement of the angel of the Holy Spirit).

characteristically sapiential practice of scriptural interpretation within the apocalyptic genre and in the name of a famous prophet. Later generations, transmitting the *Ascension of Isaiah* with modifications and in new languages, shifted the text's interpretation of Isa 6:1, making it refer to the Great Glory instead of the Beloved. In so doing, they lost what may have been a major motivation for the text, its narrative reconciliation of two classic scriptural passages. However, this shift should not be seen as a mere loss or an unfortunate mistake. These generations were engaging in sapiential practices once more, reworking their precious *Ascension of Isaiah* to fit another exegetical tradition for Isa 6. By highlighting the exceptional grandeur of Isaiah's apocalyptic ascent they enhanced the status of this prophet and thereby of his revelation. Like us, and like their forebears who created this text, these later generations enjoyed pondering the relationship of prophecy, apocalyptic, and wisdom.