

## What Would Bakhtin Say about Isaiah 21:1-12? A Re-reading<sup>1</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

*Employing the Bakhtinian theory of polyphony and dialogism, the following is a re-reading of my previous publication on the same passage.<sup>2</sup> While the feasibility of uncovering the internal aspects of the Isaian personality has been demonstrated through the first reading, the impact of reading Isaiah 21:1-12 from a Bakhtinian vantage point goes beyond literary, psychological, imaginative, and philosophical lenses to a new angle of perception: the dialogic way of presenting and constructing “truth.” On the one hand, the notion of Isaiah 21:1-12 as a polyphonic and dialogic text is established. Yet, on the other hand, there is still no “final word” with regards to the Isaian internal profile. Thus, readers are invited to engage in an ongoing dialogue with both—the author, through Isaiah’s self-presentation and projection of his internal profile, and the characters that emerge through the independent unmerged voices of the text. The anticipated result is what Bakhtin sagaciously termed, an “unfinalizable,” yet ever expanding and enriching reading on the subject.*

### A INTRODUCTION: POINT OF DEPARTURE

The postmodern notion of the “self” shapes my interpretive interest in the inner-life of the Hebrew personalities. Surprisingly, relative to the host of works devoted to the so-called “Confession of Jeremiah” (Jer 11-20), the personhood of the prophet Isaiah has attracted little attention thus far. As far as the Isaian internal profile is concerned, it is still an uncharted area in Old Testament character studies. The employment of a psychological lens, amongst other interdisciplinary tools, incites a number of interpretive interests that were formerly dormant in my “self-less” Chinese mind and repressed in my reader perspective.<sup>3</sup> As a result, topics such as the “self” and “emotions” and their respective

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<sup>1</sup> This was originally a paper read at the Bakhtin and Biblical Imagination Section at SBL, New Orleans, Louisiana, November 21-24, 2009.

<sup>2</sup> Barbara M. Leung Lai, “Uncovering the Isaian Personality: Wishful Thinking or Viable Task?” in *Text and Community: Essays in Memory of Bruce M. Metzger* (ed. J. Harold Ellens; vol. 2; Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2007), 82-100.

<sup>3</sup> 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. Hsu, “The Self in Cross-Cultural Perspective,” in *Culture and Self: Asian and Western Perspectives* (eds. Anthony J.

influence on character interiority are now placed at the foreground of exploration. The present study emerges from the challenge<sup>4</sup> of using the “I”-window as the port of entry to the Isaian internal profile, particularly through the examination of the fifteen identifiable “I”-Passages (places where Isaiah speaks in the first-person singular voice).<sup>5</sup> Up to now, my own endeavours in and adjacent to this line of inquiry have yielded some promising results<sup>6</sup> and opened up new avenues for the portraiture of other Hebrew personalities.<sup>7</sup>

My point of departure is founded on the advances in recent personality studies outlined below. Notwithstanding its inclusion in the fifteen identifiable “I”-passages, Isa 21:1-12 is unique by virtue of its intertwining speaking voices. As pioneers in the field of speaking voice analysis, Meir Sternberg<sup>8</sup> and Luis Alonso Schökel<sup>9</sup> have been successful in exemplifying the function of, the intricacy between, and the indeterminacy in identifying “monologue-dialogue” in the Hebrew Bible. Contained within the pericope are pockets of monologues within dialogues, and imaginary dialogues within monologues. Further, in his article, “Vision and Voice in Isaiah,”<sup>10</sup> Francis Landy has insightfully elucidated the interrelatedness between “voice and interiority.” I have carried these

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Marsella George A. DeVos, and Francis L.K. Hsu; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 24-55.

<sup>4</sup> Christopher R. Seitz summarized the state of this challenging 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*” (italics mine). See “Isaiah 1-66: Making Sense of the Whole,” in *Reading and Preaching the Book of Isaiah* (ed. Christopher R. Seitz, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), 120.

<sup>5</sup> 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 (5:1-30; 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).

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Leung Lai, “Uncovering the Isaian Personality,” and Leung Lai, “Aspirant Sage or Dysfunctional Seer? Cognitive Dissonance and Pastoral Vulnerability in the Profile of Daniel,” *Pastoral Psychology* 57 (2008): 199-210.

<sup>7</sup> In addition to those cited above, I am presently completing a monograph provisionally entitled, *The “I”-Window: Uncovering the Internal Profile of Hebrew Personalities* (Sheffield Phoenix Press). Various dimensions of the interiority of Isaiah, Daniel, and God as a character within the Biblical text are included in the exploration.

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

<sup>9</sup> Luis Alonso Schökel, *A Manual of Hebrew Poetics* (Editrice Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 1998).

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

views further in developing the Isaian<sup>11</sup> and Danielic<sup>12</sup> internal profiles through the “I”-Window. Respectively, these studies have turned out promising results on the first-person texts in Isaiah<sup>13</sup> and Daniel (the apocalyptic chapters 7-12), as well as the inner-life of the Hebrew God as a character (e.g., the “I”-dirge poem in Hosea 11).<sup>14</sup> At this juncture, some conceptual and methodological reorientation is required, most notably in light of the work of the Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin. By incorporating the Bakhtinian perspective on polyphony and dialogism, I seek to revisit Isaiah 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 intricacies that make up the “Isaian interiority.”

## B REORIENTATION

With reference to my published work on Isa 21:1-12,<sup>15</sup> this proposed re-reading necessitates the following conceptual and methodological re-orientations:

- (i) Adopting a historically inquiring synchronic approach<sup>16</sup> to the Isaian “self” entails a perspective that views the “self” 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.”<sup>17</sup> In essence, it is interdependent and sociocentric.
- (ii) As a major point of entry, “emotions” are perceived as markers of the construction of the Isaian “self.” The construction of the Isaian internal profile is largely dependent upon the hidden “emotive” aspects of the prophet’s “self,” as demonstrated by his response to certain events (e.g., the harsh vision in 21:2). However, emotion finds no prominence in the Bakhtinian construction of the “self.” Therefore, one has to shift from an

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<sup>11</sup> Cf. also Barbara Leung Lai, “Total Otherness, Awe-Driven Self-Condensation, and Atonement for Guilt: The Psychology of Religious Experience and Guilt in Isaiah 6,” in *Advances in Psychology Research* (ed. Alexandra M. Columbus; vol. 68; Nova Science Publishers, Inc., 2009), Ch. 8.

<sup>12</sup> Leung Lai, “Aspirant Sage or Dysfunctional Seer?”

<sup>13</sup> Cf. n. 5 above.

<sup>14</sup> Leung Lai, “Hearing God’s Bitter Cries (Hosea 11: 1-9): Reading, Emotive-Experiencing, Appropriation,” *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 26 (2004): 24-49.

<sup>15</sup> Leung Lai, “Aspirant Sage or Dysfunctional Seer?”

<sup>16</sup> An approach proposed by Odil Hannes Steck, *The Prophetic Books and their Theological Witness* (trans. James D. Nogalski; St Louis: Chalice Press, 2000), 20.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Leszek Koczanowicz, “Freedom and Communication: The Concept of Human Self in Mead and Bakhtin,” *Dialogism* 4 (2000): 60.

emotive realm to a more philosophical realm in order to devise the human “self” from a purely Bakhtinian perspective.<sup>18</sup>

- (iii) As previously stated, the multiplicity of speaking voices is unique to Isa 21:1-12. The various aspects of Isaiah’s interiority are expressed through the prophet’s self-presentation (e.g., 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” occurs. The Bakhtinian notion of a multi-voiced literary composition (or “polyphonic text”) foregrounds the presence of “unmerged” voices/consciousnesses. Each voice/consciousness embodies an independent perspective and engages into a dialogic relationship with the other ideas or consciousnesses represented within the text.
- (iv) The identification of the different Isaian “I”-perspectives through the sophisticated literary devices of imaginary dialogues within monologue and monologues within dialogue requires 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.
- (v) Finally, the Bakhtinian framework necessitates a re-orientation with respect to the role of the author, the role of the characters/personalities within the text, and the role of the readers, as they are invited to enter into an ongoing, open dialogue with the ideas and consciousnesses within the text. Therefore, reading becomes more than a one-time event, but a continual and boundless form of discourse.

## C WHAT WOULD BAKHTIN SAY ABOUT ISAIAH 21:1-12? AN INTEGRATED RE-READING

### 1 Reading agenda

The multiplicity of speaking voices forms the crux of the Isaian self-presentation. This dynamic is conveyed by the presence of monologues within dialogues and imaginary dialogues within monologues. Sternberg considered the function of monologue as an internal “doubling-of-oneself” or imaginary dia-

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<sup>18</sup> E.g., the different “I”-positions: I-for-myself; I-for-others; and Others-for me. Cf. Mikhael M. Bakhtin, *Toward a Philosophy of the Act* (ed. Vadim Liapunov and Michael Holquist; trans. Vadim Liapunov; Austin: University of Texas Press, 1993), 54; and Koczanowicz, “Freedom and Communication,” 62-66.

logue consisting of pockets of dialogue.<sup>19</sup> By adopting Sternberg's views, one can collapse the distinctiveness between dialogue and monologue, as they serve the same function of self-representation within Isa 21:1-12. The present inquiry will focus on the ways in which the Bakhtinian theories of polyphony and dialogism offer new angles of perception and expand the reader's horizon in reading the text. More specifically, our primary focus is investigating how a Bakhtinian understanding of the intersection between monologue and imaginary dialogue provides access to the rich portrayal of the hidden aspects of the "Isaian interiority."

## 2 From Bakhtinian dialogism and polyphony to Isaiah 21:1-12 as a dialogic and polyphonic text

Bakhtin's concepts of polyphony and dialogism proceed from his analysis of the work of the Russian novelist, Fyodor Dostoevsky. According to Bakhtin, Dostoevsky's writings possessed and approximated a genuine dialogue between author, characters, and consciousnesses.<sup>20</sup> 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 sentence construct or even the word, but the "utterance." Any utterance or discourse, whether spoken or written, is always addressed to someone, and therefore possesses a dialogic quality.<sup>21</sup> Thus, at the foundation of Bakhtin's ideology is the view that any form of discourse is always a reply and therefore, always takes shape in response to what has already been said. This also includes "the background of other concrete utterances on the same theme, a background made up of contradictory opinions, points of view and value judgments."<sup>22</sup> Carol 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

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<sup>19</sup> Or more precisely, the first-person projection of the third-person view, Isaiah employs both, internal doubling (vv. 6-7; 8-9) and imaginary dialogue (vv. 6-9; 11-12) rather candidly. Cf. Sternberg, "The World from the Addressee's Viewpoint," 295-318.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Carol A. Newsom, "Bakhtin, the Bible, and Dialogic Truth," *The Journal of Religion* 76 (1996): 290-306, esp. 295.

<sup>21</sup> Mikhail M. Bakhtin, "The Problem of Speech Genre" in *Speech Genre and Other Late Essays* (trans. V. McGee; Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986), 60-102; Andrés A. Haye, "Living Being and Speaking Being: Toward a Dialogical Approach to Intentionality," *Integr Psych Behav* 42 (2008): 157-163 (esp. 160-161).

<sup>22</sup> Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* (ed. Michael Holquist; trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist; Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986), 281. Cf. also Newsom, *Bakhtin, the Bible, and Dialogic Truth*, 302.

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way in which it is implicitly dialogized by its orientation to the already said and the yet to be said.<sup>23</sup>

Therefore, any form of discourse always “replies in implicit dialogue with what has already been said,” real or imaginary, external or internal or otherwise.<sup>24</sup>

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

In accordance with Bakhtin’s categorization of dialogism and dialogic truth, Isa 21:1-12 can be read as a dialogic text, containing dialogic truths. Verse 10 best captures the dialogic context of the pericope as a whole: “Oh my threshed people,<sup>28</sup> 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 being the recipient of the harsh vision (v. 2) to being the messenger of the divine message (vv. 6-9). 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 (vv. 3-4) and emotively (vv. 8, 11-12). Yet, on the other hand, he renounces his monologic individuality and instead engages in a sort of dialogic relationship with God, self, and audience (i.e. Babylon, Israel, and Dumah). Exercising some 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).<sup>29</sup> Therefore, each Isaian utterance within the text (whether monologic or imaginative-dialogic [e.g., vv. 11-12]) possesses a layered meaning based on the in-

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<sup>23</sup> Carol A. Newsom, “The Book of Job as Polyphony Text,” *JSOT* 97 (2002): 90.

<sup>24</sup> Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, 90.

<sup>25</sup> Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics* (ed. & trans. C. Emerson; Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 81.

<sup>26</sup> Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, 81.

<sup>27</sup> Newsom, “Bakhtin, the Bible, and Dialogic Truth,” 295-296.

<sup>28</sup> Literally, the text reads: “Oh my threshed, the son of my threshing floor!” For more, cf. Leung Lai, “Uncovering the Isaian Personality,” p. 93, n. 49.

<sup>29</sup> Bakhtin, *Toward a Philosophy of the Act* (ed. Vadim Liapunov and Michael. Holquist; trans. V. Liapunov; Austin: University of Texas Press, 1993), 54; cf. also Koczanowicz, “Freedom and Communication,” 62-66.



ternal interaction between the “I” (Isaiah), the “other” (God), and the “I-for-the-other” (the original audience and contemporary readers). However, a literary tension arises due to the overwhelming number of “indeterminate” speaking voices within the monologic utterances and imaginary dialogues Isaiah uses to communicate his inner thoughts and feelings. Digging behind the utterance(s) into the inner-life of the prophet 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”<sup>30</sup> reveals a whole new dimension of Isa 21:1-12. 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.

### 3 Dialogism, polyphony, and the Isaian interiority/personality

The monologic “I”-expressions within Isa 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,” as who says them is of the essence.<sup>31</sup> Therefore, dialogic truth has a unique personal quality, where the personality of the speaker becomes integral to the very meaning of the discourse itself.<sup>32</sup> 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 a legitimate “point of entry” to discerning the very meaning of the prophetic message. However, as we have seen, 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 a productive and effective appropriation of the prophet’s internal profile. Landy has advocated, rather convincingly, the interrelatedness between “voice and interiority” within the book of Isaiah.<sup>33</sup> Accordingly, the different versions of the “I” within Isa 21:1-12 should be regarded as independent, but integrated “voices” (spoken or unspoken; real or imaginary, etc.), rather than a mere *form* of expression. 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, whether it is his own internal emotions, God, his audience, or the doubling-up of himself. Or, alternatively, in the ongoing world of actions (being-as-event), Bakhtin would have articu-

<sup>30</sup> Schökel, *A Manual of Hebrew Poetics*, 178; cf. also Leung Lai, “Uncovering the Isaian Personality,” 92.

<sup>31</sup> Newsom, “Bakhtin, the Bible, and Dialogic Truth,” 294.

<sup>32</sup> Newsom, “The Book of Job as Polyphony Text,” 91-92.

<sup>33</sup> Landy, “Vision and Voice in Isaiah,” 22-25, 36.

lated this dynamic as “Isaiah-for-himself, the other-for-Isaiah, and Isaiah-for-the-other.”<sup>34</sup>

Thus, the multiplicity of speaking voices present within Isa 21:1-12 are only 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).<sup>35</sup> 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.<sup>36</sup> 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.<sup>37</sup> 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 internal profile of the prophet.

The film “The Bridges of Madison Country” contains a scene in the kitchen where the character Francesca dramatically portrays her inner struggle through the monologue genre. The same audience-response may well be appropriated here:

From [an] 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, [one] perceive[s] the developing, accumulating, intensifying, deepening results of [the Isaian] inner struggles being brought to the foreground.<sup>38</sup>

Moreover, it is important to look beyond the “foreground” of monologic expressions to the deeper, embedded dialogue transpiring within the conscious-

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<sup>34</sup> Bakhtin, *Toward a Philosophy of the Act*, 54; Koczanowicz, “Freedom and Communication,” 62-66.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. Leung Lai, “Uncovering the Isaian Personality,” 96.

<sup>36</sup> Charles Miller follows a similar appropriation of Bakhtin in Charles W. Miller, “Reading Voices: Personification, Dialogism, and the Reader of Lamentation 1,” *Bib-Int* 9 (2001): 393-408 (esp. 393).

<sup>37</sup> Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, 81, 89.

<sup>38</sup> Leung Lai, “Uncovering the Isaian Personality,” 93.



ness of the prophet. In this way, meaning is not forged only by isolated or independent monologues or dialogues, but can be further enriched and expanded through 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.<sup>39</sup> 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."<sup>40</sup> Therefore, as mentioned above, the speaking voices within dialogue and monologue are to some degree "indeterminate," as "there are pockets of monologue in dialogue and imaginary dialogue in monologue."<sup>41</sup> Since for Bakhtin all discourse possesses a dialogic quality, those passages using the third-person perspective to project 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"<sup>42</sup> of the Isaian internal profile, enabling them to enter into dialogue with the constant and perpetual development of the prophet's "interiority."<sup>43</sup>

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).

<sup>39</sup> Sternberg, "The World from the Addressee's Viewpoint," 295-318.

<sup>40</sup> Leung Lai, "Uncovering the Isaian Personality," 94.

<sup>41</sup> Leung Lai, "Uncovering the Isaian Personality," 91.

<sup>42</sup> 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" (Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 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.

<sup>43</sup> Leung Lai, "Uncovering the Isaian Personality," 96-97.

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 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. As a result, 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 directly by the author.<sup>44</sup>

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.<sup>45</sup> We must then 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. For Bakhtin, "the polyphonic text is an intentional artistic representation of the dialogic nature of an idea."<sup>46</sup> If the multiplicity of speaking voices within Isa 21:1-12 are viewed as intentional, what effect does this have on the audience? Which emotions does 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 here demonstrates the refined and sophisticated techniques of Isaiah's self-presentation.<sup>47</sup> 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

<sup>44</sup> 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" (Leung Lai, "Uncovering the Isaian Personality," 96).

<sup>45</sup> Cf. Hubert Hermans, and Agnieszka Hermans-Konopka, *Dialogic Self Theory: Positioning and Counter-Positioning as a Globalizing Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Hubert Hermans, Harry J. G. Kempen, Rens J. P. Van Loon, "The Dialogical Self: Beyond Individualism and Rationalism," *American Psychologist* 47 (1992): 23-33.

<sup>46</sup> Cf. Newsom, "Bakhtin, the Bible, and Dialogic Truth," 297.

<sup>47</sup> Leung Lai, "Uncovering the Isaian Personality," 97.

within monologues) is caused by those same emotions (i.e. fear, pain, agony, lamenting cries, anxiety, impatience, and helplessness). In this manner, both, the means and product of the communication of the Isaian internal profile are one and the same.

#### **4 Isaian self-representation and reader/audience's emotive-experiencing**

As stated above, the key here is to explore the way 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-presentation.<sup>48</sup> If monologue is considered 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.<sup>49</sup> It is for this reason that Timothy Polk writes: "Emotion language not only attests a self, it is constitutive of the self. People become selves as they use such language."<sup>50</sup> The emotionality of Isaiah's role as prophet is characterized by the expressions of the physical pain and emotional stress that he experiences resulting from the harsh vision.<sup>51</sup> As such, the emotive quality of the Isaian discourse affects the dialogic relationship of the text in two ways. First, the internal, emotive state of Isaiah dictates and largely determines the form and outward delivery of his prophetic message. Second, these same emotions are intimately linked to the reception of the message, and thus, have the transitive impact upon the audience's emotional response. 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, and largely induce my own emotional response. On these grounds, readers are drawn to participate in the silent question<sup>52</sup> and to engage in 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!

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<sup>48</sup> I have found this emotive dimension quite unattended in the Bakhtinian discussions on polyphony and dialogism.

<sup>49</sup> Leung Lai, "Uncovering the Isaian Personality," 93.

<sup>50</sup> Cf. Timothy Polk, *The Prophetic Persona: Jeremiah and the Language of the Self* (JSOTSup 32; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1984), 24. Note also 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," 82-100.

<sup>51</sup> Leung Lai, "Uncovering the Isaian Personality," 88.

<sup>52</sup> Peter Miscall notes that since the word דְּמוּיָה in Hebrew means "silence," so are the question and answer a type of silence; see Miscall, *Isaiah. Readings: A New Biblical Commentary* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 60.

Return! Come!” (v.12b). As a truly polyphonic and dialogic text, Isa 21:1-12 ends “silently and openly,” earnestly inviting the readers (with their own voice/consciousness) to engage in an ongoing, “unfinalizable” quest that is of a dialogic nature.

## D BAKHTIN AND BEYOND

The Bakhtinian notion of “unfinalizability” relative to 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, reading the “Bakhtinian way” has no boundary and thus opens up several highways and byways for Biblical scholars to venture from their respective methodological domains. 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.”<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> As the name of the SBL section on Bakhtin indicates, “Bakhtin and Biblical Imagination.”

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