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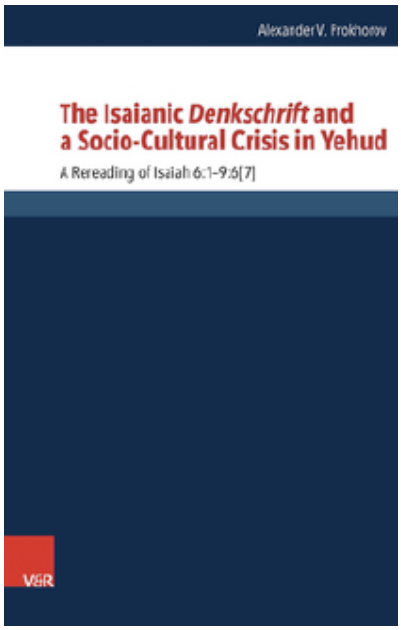

Alexander Prokhorov

The Isaianic* Denkschrift *and a Socio-cultural Crisis in Yehud: A Rereading of Isaiah 6:1–9:6[7]

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This book is a revised version of the author's PhD dissertation submitted to the University of Aberdeen in 2013. The monograph provides a new reading of the Isaianic memoir (Isa 6:1–9:6), also known as Isaiah's *Denkschrift*. This pericope has traditionally been considered one of the key sections of the book on the basis of which one used to reconstruct the mind map of the eighth-century prophet or, more generally, to derive information regarding the phenomenon of Israelite/Judean prophecy and prophetic literature. In five chapters and several focused excursuses placed in a separate appendix, combining literary interpretation and social-scientific analysis, Prokhorov argues that the *Denkschrift* is a coherent text pervaded by the ideological matrix of the early postexilic period. Instead of being a source for eighth-century realities or an incentive for the later book of Isaiah, the memoir was one of the latest compositions in the process of the formation of First Isaiah.

Chapter 1 contains a brief overview of research on First Isaiah and the *Denkschrift* in particular, limiting itself to a few titles of key importance. The author adheres to approaches "that centre on various didactic or ideological motives as primary incentives for the formation of the Isaianic tradition" (21). He notes that recent developments in Pentateuch studies ascribe an important role to the Persian period as a time "when different strands of tradition were brought together in one composition, but also as a cradle of many key texts and concepts in that composition, created

in response to the socio-political situation of the community of Yehud" (22). With respect to the *Denkschrift*, he takes a critical stance on other interpretations that differentiate between earlier layers and later additions and decides to enquire into the significance of the thematic consistency of the *Denkschrift* (25–26).

Chapter 2 presents the material and method of study. Isaiah 6:1–9:6 is considered a coherent text, a coherence believed to be substantiated by the intertextual links—or "resonances"—between various verses of the section. Prokhorov identifies in Isa 6:1–9:6 "an increasing progression that culminates in the hope of a long-lasting rule of Yahweh's special prince" (29). He dismisses the general view that either 6:12–13 or (with some hesitation) 7:18–25 would be later insertions (30–32). Prokhorov argues that, if the material possesses "some inalienable property that would require or suggest that the text be interpreted along certain lines … then an imposition of any external perspective … will violate the integrity of the material" (34). By this he questions any attempt to impose the categorisation of "prophetic text" on the memoir. With reference to R. Carroll, G. A. Auld, and T. Bulkeley, he challenges the general concept of writing prophets as well as assumptions of generic realism observable in form-critical readings. What Prokhorov himself offers is not a more complex categorization but rather the abandonment of any attempt to generic clarification, "blurring the distinction between the *nəbîʾîm* and other biblical texts" (35). The author maintains that both the image of the prophet Isaiah and the material differ substantially from the ancient Near Eastern prophets and prophetic texts. They cannot be anything but imitations of a prophetic style.

As for the method, Prokhorov considers the *Denkschrift* a continuous discourse that in all its parts depends on Isa 36–39 (38). His implicit historical interest behind the literary composition is underlined by a separate section discussing the hermeneutical role of socioanthropological perspectives, such as cultural identity, the fundamental role of mimesis in healing the memories of the past, and the cognitive perspective of a symbolic universe that "orders history by shaping a shared 'memory' of the past" (51). In subsequent analysis he searches for such identity markers, matching these socioanthropological perspectives to the text of the *Denkschrift*.

Chapter 3 deals with the interpretation of the separate units within the memoir: Isa 6:1–13; 7:1–24 and 8:1–9:6. In each case he provides a new translation of the text with various remarks in the footnotes, followed by an analysis of the text focusing on selected themes. Prokhorov considers the notion of the death of King Uzziah in Isa 6:1 the actual incentive of the prophecy. The description of Yahweh's kingship, of "enormous significance" (65) for the prophecy, appears in relation to the death of an earthly king, which he regards as pointing to a period of power vacuum within the society behind the text. He argues that "the rhetorical purpose of the reference to the death of a king … is to provide a marker of uncertainty, vulnerability and anticipation of change" (65). He calls attention to the differences between the biblical prophet and its Near Eastern equivalents. "Rather than doing what other ancient Near Eastern prophets

and their biblical counterparts usually did … the messenger is now both emancipated from control by any royal figure and enfranchised to perform actions which tend to be associated with the realm of deities," where Prokhorov refers to the strange command to Isaiah to harden the hearts of the people (74). The "general, cross-cultural cultic concept" (72 n. 73) used in Isa 6 underlines the cultic superiority of religious specialists in the background, thereby highlighting the close connection with the early postexilic texts (Hag 2:14).

Isaiah 7:1, where the biblical author is presumed to adapt the tradition of 2 Kgs 16:5 (80 n. 12, 87), connects Isa 7 to the previous section. At the same time, the story has its own ideological character. In Prokhorov's view, Damascus's role is rather marginal here, and the text focuses on Ephraim, in which he senses a clear anti-Samaritan polemic of the postexilic period (88), also boosted by verse 17, where the author implicitly criticizes Ephraim for having departed from Judah. Prokhorov considers the metaphor of "hired razor" so infuriatingly pejorative toward Assyria that "this reference rules out the entire period of the Judaean monarchy as a setting for the *Denkschrift*" (92). Assyria is actually a cover name for the Persian kingdom (106). These interpretations lead him to conclude that Isa 7 functioned as a response to a society where the role of the king is taken over by the population represented here by Immanuel "by subverting their own traditions" (113).

Despite the changes of personal pronouns in first- and third-person narratives, "Isaiah 8:1–9:6 appears to be a carefully constructed discourse that weaves together various motifs and presents itself as a narrative switching between biographical, autobiographical and reflective modes" (123–24). The juxtaposition of Judah's destruction and restoration need not be the result of compilation of independent pieces of material. It is, rather, "another ideological tool from the 'crisis-kit' used by the community of Judah in order to create for itself historical credentials that would overshadow its bleak historical record" (140).

Chapter 4 provides a synthesis of key features of the *Denkschrift*, surveying the consistency and coherence of its ideology with summative observations regarding its date of composition. The ideological consistency is discussed with respect to six particular topics: Yahweh's kingship, the presentation of the prophet, the theocratic view of the world, the cultural polemics, the promotion of the *gôlā* group, and the anti-Samaritan rhetoric. The section on ideological coherence reflects on the above-noted six major components from the perspective of cognitive, behavioral socioanthropological studies, as well as from the viewpoint of cultural identity. In a second subsection of this chapter, Prokhorov calls attention to the place of the *Denkschrift* in relation to other Isaianic and non-Isaianic texts both on conceptual and literary levels. He concludes that "the Hezekiah narrative and the *Denkschrift* are two consecutive versions of the same ideologically-oriented composition, which was forged on the basis of the Deuteronomistic material" (181).

Chapter 5 is a short summary of this research: "The Isaianic *Denkschrift* makes sense as a coherent composition produced by a single hand in the end of the sixth or the beginning of the fifth century BCE. The author's main objective may best be described as overcoming a crisis of cultural identity among the inhabitants of Judah" (184). It is only in this summative section that Prokhorov provides a brief sketch of the historical and social situation in the period when he assumes the memoir took its shape.

The appendix includes excursuses on a few problematic terms and expressions within the *Denkschrift*. The book closes with a bibliography and a short subject index. No index is provided on cited primary textual sources (biblical or other) or modern authors.

Prokhorov's contentions are obviously challenging and raise huge questions that neither space, nor time permit me to cover in this review. I shall address here only some of those issues that I consider of major importance for his overall view on this section of Isaiah.

There is an unfortunate methodological inconsistency in this study that significantly reduces the validity of its principle contentions. While Prokhorov rejects redaction criticism as a possible method for reconstructing the formation of the *Denkschrift* (19–20), the reader is perplexed to see that he nevertheless comes to explain the composition of the book of Isaiah as a redactional growth, expanding in about 150 years, with textual blocks of various sizes and origins deriving from different periods (179–84; Prokhorov uses the term "compiler"). While he evokes the criticism of J. Barton's famous study ("What Is a Book?") only in relation to redaction criticism as a method used to explain the formation of the *Denkschrift* (20), I believe that the conclusions that Prokhorov takes over from Barton's article can also be used in relation to his reconstruction of the formation of the book of Isaiah (note especially the arguments used in discussing the differences between Isa 36–39 and Isa 6–9 on 166–75). The question is therefore apparently not whether redaction criticism as a method is useful (as the introduction suggests) but whether one may adopt such an approach in analyzing shorter textual units such as the memoir.

While refusing to work with the tools of literary criticism and redaction criticism, Prokhorov nonetheless makes use of the conclusions of other exegetes in presenting his arguments, which conclusions in turn depend on redaction-critical readings. For example, Carroll's well-known thesis that prophets were poets is deduced from his distinction between early poetic and later prosaic texts, considering their combination the result of redaction. From this theory, Prokhorov takes over the assumption that questions the existence of Old Testament prophecy, maintaining nevertheless that the poetic and prosaic passages in Isa 7–8 form a literary unit (see 37–38).

The literary coherence of the *Denkschrift* is presupposed rather than proven. It is fully legitimate to take the final form of the text as starting point for exegesis. The signals that are perceived as composite textual markers may be subjective. Nonetheless, plausibility and fairness should, I

believe, play a central role here. One may argue for various literary "resonances" between different sections of the memoir, yet the question remains how likely those connections derive from the same author. Prokhorov is very much aware of this, as his analysis of the relationship between Isa 7 and 36–39 makes clear (93–97; see also 166–75). There is a well-known view within Isaiah studies that the narratives about Ahaz and Hezekiah are antithetic compositions with numerous deliberate internal references to each other, such as the use of the sign (*'ôt*) motif, the fear-not oracle, the space marker (7:3 and 36:2), and the motifs of remnant and faith in Yahweh. In addressing this issue in relation to his claim about the original unity of the *Denkschrift,* Prokhorov presents his detailed criticism: "there is a substantial discrepancy between the accounts about signs" in the two texts (94); the fear-not oracles received by both kings are also used differently when considering their respective relations to the statements about Assyria; similarly, "the supposed dialectical opposition between faith and unbelief is rather illusory than genuine" (94); finally, there is a difference between the space markers of Isa 7:3 and 36:2: while the former text locates at the end of the conduit of the upper pool on the highway to the Fuller's Field a dialogue between Ahaz and Isaiah, in Isa 36:2 it is the Rabshakeh who utters a monologue on the same location. From the lack of any evidence that these narratives once stood side by side Prokhorov considers the scenario of antithetical narratives "improbable and hardly ever attested in literature" (95). These critical remarks elicit important questions. The fact that he disregards empirical evidence concerning the change and relocation of biblical texts (cf. Isa 36–39 with 2 Kgs 18–20; or the differences within the LXX and MT versions of Jeremiah) is the smaller problem. More important, one may wonder why Prokhorov did not impose the same rigorous standards to his own intertextual analysis of Isa 6:1–9:6, for the resonances to which attention is called within the *Denkschrift* and that are presupposed to attest to the coherence and consistence of this pericope are in most cases actually far less significant than those appearing within Isa 7 and 36–39 (e.g., his connection of 6:2 and 7:20 or 6:6–7 and 9:4, or the alleged relation between the motif of "holy offspring" in Isa 6:13 and the "offspring of kingship" in the Cyrus Cylinder).

Prokhorov does not seriously deal with the issues questioning the unity of the *Denkschrift*. To mention the two most obvious problems, there is no discussion on how the change of first- and third-person accounts in Isa 6, 7, and 8 should be related to his single-layered unit hypothesis, nor does he explore the intricacies of the relationship of 8:8–9 with its immediate context. It is hard to see why a comprehensive analysis on this aspect was neglected, as the entire theory of postexilic derivation of the *Denkschrift* stands and falls on one's viewpoint regarding the literary unity of this pericope.

Prokhorov often touches on highly debated subjects within Old Testament scholarship, short-circuiting important discussions in a few rows, such as the nature of Old Testament prophecy (34–35), the Egyptian presence in Canaan (67), monotheism (98–100), the Zion tradition (101–3), the united monarchy (110–11), the aniconism debate (150), and the dating of Second Isaiah (163). Various parts of his arguments are based on selective literature that does not reflect well

the complexities of the problems involved, questioning the reliability of his own conclusions based on cumulative argumentation with respect to those topics.

Prokhorov considers the differences between the imagery of the prophet in Isa 6–8 and the ancient Near Eastern sources reason enough to conclude that the prophet of the *Denkschrift* has little to do with the realities of the preexilic period. He states that "Israelite prophets … had no qualitative distinctions from prophetic personalities of Mesopotamia and other ancient Near Eastern cultures" (135). While such statements do help us to understand how Prokhorov arrives at his conclusions, they are nonetheless seriously oversimplifying. A closer consideration of the various contexts would have significantly relativized the conclusions drawn from these differences. The royal focus of the Neo-Assyrian prophecies is concordant with the function that these prophecies fulfilled within their setting and the archives from which they derived, which was hardly the case for the biblical texts. Moreover, it is certainly unsatisfactory to treat prophecy in the Near East as a uniform or homogenous phenomenon (even within the same culture; e.g., the critical potential of the usually promonarchic Assyrian prophecy or the authority debates within Near Eastern prophecy). While Prokhorov does mention the significant differences between the Mari and Neo-Assyrian prophetic texts (41), he nonetheless treats both as belonging to the same genre of prophecy. One may wonder why, then, the deviations of the prophecies of the *Denkschrift* from the Neo-Assyrian texts would deprive the former of the same general classification of prophecy. Moreover, one may also ask whether this search for parallels in Mari or Neo-Assyrian texts (not to mention the invocation of the Cyrus Cylinder in relation to Isa 6; see 68–69) would not be an impediment in reaching Prokhorov's standard, namely, not to impose any external perspective in interpreting the text (34)? The fact that Prokhorov does not provide ancient Near Eastern parallels that would warrant reading the amalgam text of the *Denkschrift* as a coherent passage is also a problem. Similarly, it is strange that the other prophetic texts, Zechariah and Haggai, to which the *Denkschrift* is seen as related are seen as ideological counterparts, in spite of their huge textual differences. Overemphasized difference with respect to ancient Near Easter prophecy, on the one hand, and disregarded difference with Zechariah and Haggai, on the other hand, put question marks behind this approach.

As noted above, Prokhorov also looks for historical clues that would help to place the text within a postexilic context. One wonders how exactly Prokhorov reconstructs the historical, social, and ideological realities of the postexilic community. The answer to this question is not clarified from the beginning; it is rather assumed all along. These assumptions come to be worded as isolated ideas, which do not, however, coalesce into a clear picture that would do justice to the complexities of the postexilic reality (e.g., attitude toward kingship, relationship between the returnees and the inhabitants of the land, relationship with Samaria, the role of mediators, attitude towards prophecy, family). Ideally, one would also expect a presentation of arguments (other than the presumed unity of the memoir) why the texts of the *Denkschrift* could unlikely better be read in another historical and social setting, for instance, how the following statement

could be pacified with the realities of the 8-7th century Assyrian imperialism: "The idea of Yahweh as king over Judah … makes little sense in the context of the Judaean monarchy but rather fits the setting of post-monarchic Judah—a period after ca. 570 BCE" (146).

Ideology is a very flexible and hardly reliable criterion to be used in dating the texts. At best, this book provides examples how the *Denkschrift* could have been received in the Persian period. Intertextual allusions are not less problematic—as Prokhorov himself has shown in his analysis of the relationship between Isa 36–39 and Isa 7— and should therefore also be rigorously tested against several possible interpretative patterns. At any rate, for the present reviewer this is not the study to substantiate the claims regarding either the original unity or the postexilic derivation of the *Denkschrift*.