

Theological Interpretation of Assyrian Propaganda in the Book of Isaiah

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Discussions of Assyrian influence on the book of Isaiah¹ are ultimately indebted to the approach of the history of religions school, which originated in the late nineteenth century in Göttingen with scholars such as Hermann Gunkel, Wilhelm Bousset, Hugo Gressmann, Bernhard Weiss, and others.² This group was fascinated by the archaeological finds in Egypt and Mesopotamia and concluded that the Bible had to be interpreted in light of its corresponding religious-historical context.

This naturally caused significant turmoil in both academia and the church. Some feared the uniqueness of the Bible might be in danger, and there were times when adherents of the history of religions school overstated their point. A good example is the so-called Babel-Bibel-Streit, which arose after a lecture on Jan. 13, 1902, by the Assyriologist Friedrich Delitzsch on the topic “Babel and the Bible” in the presence of the Emperor Wilhelm II.³ Delitzsch suggested that the Bible is not a text *sui generis*, but basically a copy of its Mesopotamian literary precursors.

There is no doubt that Delitzsch exaggerated his point, especially in his subsequent work and publications, and he was rightly criticized for falling into a kind of pan-Babylonism. His approach even provoked public mockery: his enthusiasm for Babylonia made its way into one of the most prominent satire magazines of the time, the *Simplicissimus*.⁴

It is fair to say that current biblical scholarship entertains a quite balanced approach to evaluating ancient Near Eastern sources with regard to its subject. It is commonly accepted that it is not only possible, but even necessary to take these texts into account if they provide analogies or parallels to biblical materials.

¹ See particularly Matthijs J. DE JONG, *Isaiah among the Ancient Near Eastern Prophets: A Comparative Study of the Earliest Stages of the Isaiah Tradition and the Neo-Assyrian Prophecies*, VTSup 117 (Leiden: Brill, 2007). On the history of research in this respect, see Konrad SCHMID, “Jesaja als altorientalisches Buch: Aspekte der Forschungsgeschichte,” *HeBAI* 6 (2017): 7–25.

² See Gerd LÜDEMANN and Alf ÖZEN, “Religionsgeschichtliche Schule,” *TRE* 28 (1997): 618–24.

³ See Reinhard G. LEHMANN, *Friedrich Delitzsch und der Babel-Bibel-Streit*, OBO 133 (Fribourg: Academic Press; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1989).

⁴ Cf. Thomas Theodor HEINE (1867–1948), *Simplicissimus* 7/52, March 24 (1903): 409.

A particular boost in that regard has been provided by scholarship on the book of Deuteronomy, especially by Moshe Weinfeld, Bernard M. Levinson, Hans Ulrich Steymans, Eckart Otto, and others.⁵ They demonstrate how Deuteronomy is shaped after the model of Neo-Assyrian vassal treaties while simultaneously altering that model in a subversive manner.

As for the book of Isaiah, already Bernhard Duhm's seminal commentary from 1892 prominently includes the comparative perspective among the main tasks of his analysis of the book.⁶ According to him, the three main objectives of his commentary were: 1. ascertaining the text; 2. exploring what the authors actually say and intended to say; and 3. a "conscious cultural- and religio-historical critique of the book in order to protect it from the raids of dogmaticians of all colors."⁷

How to interpret such cross-cultural and cross-religious connections is, of course, open to debate. First, one needs to assess the quality of a parallel. Is a parallel to be understood in terms of a literal adoption or a tradition-historical borrowing? Or are similarities due to various groups' similar reactions to similar historical experiences? All of these are possible, and conclusions should be drawn on a case by case basis. Second, and this is even more important, one must ask: What is the significance of such thematic connections in terms of content?

When discussing the book of Isaiah and its Neo-Assyrian affiliations in particular, a very basic observation regarding genre is in order: There are basically two possible approaches for assessing Assyrian influences on the book of Isaiah. One possibility is to consider the records of Neo-Assyrian prophecy made available by Manfred Weippert, Simo Parpola, Martti Nissinen and others,⁸ which

⁵ Cf. Moshe WEINFELD, "Traces of Assyrian Treaty Formulae in Deuteronomy," *Bib* 46 (1965): 417–27; Hans-Ulrich STEYMANS, *Deuteronomium 28 und die adē zur Thronfolge-regelung Asarhaddons: Segen und Fluch im Alten Orient und in Israel*, OBO 145 (Fribourg: Academic Press; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1995); idem, "Deuteronomy 28 and Tell Tayinat," *Verbum et Ecclesia* 34 (2013): 1–13; Bernard M. LEVINSON, *Deuteronomy and the Hermeneutics of Legal Innovation* (New York: Oxford, 1997); Eckart OTTO, *Das Deuteronomium: Politische Theologie und Rechtsreform in Juda und Assyrien*, BZAW 284 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1999); Bernard M. LEVINSON and Jeffrey STACKERT, "Between the Covenant Code and Esarhaddon's Succession Treaty: Deuteronomy 13 and the Composition of Deuteronomy," *JAJ* 3 (2012): 123–40; differently Carly L. CROUCH, *Israel and the Assyrians: Deuteronomy, the Succession Treaty of Esarhaddon, and the Nature of Subversion*, ANEM 8 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2014).

⁶ Bernhard DUHM, *Das Buch Jesaja*, HKAT III/11 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1892). On DUHM, see Henning Graf REVENTLOW, "Die Prophetie im Urteil Bernhard Duhms," *ZTK* 85 (1988): 259–74; Rudolf SMEND, *Deutsche Alttestamentler aus drei Jahrhunderten* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1989), 114–28.

⁷ DUHM, *Das Buch Jesaja*, IV. Original text: "1. die Sicherung des Textes, 2. Heraus-zustellen, 'was die Autoren eigentlich sagen und sagen wollen' und 3. das Achten auf 'bewusste kultur- und religionsgeschichtliche Kritik', damit das Jesajabuch vor 'Razzien der Dogmatiker aller Farben' gefeilt sei."

⁸ Simo PARPOLA, *Assyrian Prophecies*, SAA 9 (Helsinki: Helsinki University Press, 1997); Martti NISSINEN, *Prophets and Prophecy in the Ancient Near East*, WAW 12 (Atlanta: Society

especially Matthijs de Jong's dissertation has evaluated.⁹ The other possibility is to survey the wider Neo-Assyrian text corpus beyond the genre of prophetic literature. What kind of contacts can one detect between these texts and the book of Isaiah? Both approaches are legitimate. However, in my view the second one is more promising because the book of Isaiah's interaction with Neo-Assyrian sources focused more on Neo-Assyrian ideology than on Neo-Assyrian prophecy.

The relevance of Neo-Assyrian prophecy pertains mostly to aspects of possible forms of prophetic messages in the ancient Near East – how these messages were written down, organized, structured, and used as written texts. With regard to theological content, they are of rather minor importance due to the often unremarkable message of Neo-Assyrian prophets. In most cases, they simply function to support and legitimate royal policies. In addition, these Neo-Assyrian prophecies were probably unknown in Judah.

The decidedly richer material outside the specifically prophetic texts from Assyria are much more important for understanding the book of Isaiah than the Neo-Assyrian prophecies. In the aftermath of Peter Machinist's seminal 1983 essay, this kind of inquiry into Neo-Assyrian motifs in the book of Isaiah belongs to the indispensable repertoire of Isaiah scholarship.¹⁰ Machinist primarily demonstrates the close proximity of certain texts of Isaiah to Assyrian propaganda. Recent scholarship has pressed the question a bit further, attempting to understand the nature of this process of reception in more detail. Good examples of such an investigation appear in the works of Friedhelm Hartenstein and Reinhard Müller.¹¹ Their insights concern the specific interpretation and

of Biblical Literature, 2003); Manfred WEIPPERT, "Aspekte israelitischer Prophetie im Lichte verwandter Erscheinungen des Alten Orients," in *Ad bene et fideliter seminandum: Festschrift für Karlheinz Deller*, ed. Gerlinde MAUER and Ursula MAGEN, AOAT 220 (Kevelaer: Butzon & Bercker; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1988), 287–319; idem, WEIPPERT, "Assyrische Prophetie der Zeit Asarhaddons und Assurbanipals," in *Assyrian Royal Inscriptions: New Horizons in Literary, Ideological and Historical Analysis*, ed. Frederick M. FALES, OAC 17 (Rome: Istituto per l'Oriente, 1981), 71–115; idem, "Die Bildsprache der neuassyrischen Prophetie," in *Beiträge zur prophetischen Bildsprache in Israel und Assyrien*, ed. Helga WEIPPERT et al., OBO 64 (Fribourg: Academic Press; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1985), 55–93 (these articles are reprinted in Manfred WEIPPERT, *Götterwort in Menschenmund: Studien zur Prophetie in Assyrien, Israel und Juda*, FRLANT 252 [Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2014]). Martti NISSINEN, "Die Relevanz der neuassyrischen Prophetie für die alttestamentliche Forschung," in *Mesopotamica – Ugaritica – Biblica: Festschrift für Kurt Bergerhof*, ed. Manfred DIETRICH and Oswald LORETZ, AOAT 232 (Kevelaer: Butzon & Bercker; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1993), 217–58; idem, *References to Prophecy in Neo-Assyrian Sources*, SAA 7 (Helsinki: Helsinki University Press, 1998); idem, *Ancient Prophecy: Near Eastern, Biblical, and Greek Perspectives* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018); Jonathan STOEKL, *Prophecy in the Ancient Near East: A Philological and Sociological Comparison*, CHANE 56 (Leiden: Brill, 2012).

⁹ See n. 1.

¹⁰ Peter MACHINIST, "Assyria and Its Image in the First Isaiah," *JAOS* 103 (1983): 719–37.

¹¹ Friedhelm HARTENSTEIN, *Die Unzugänglichkeit Gottes im Heiligtum: Jesaja 6 und der*

transformation of the content of the Neo-Assyrian propaganda borrowed by the Isaiah tradition, which is a significant step beyond the traditional evaluation of Assyrian material in the book of Isaiah.

In what follows, this approach shall be presented through examples from the core of the Isaiah tradition in Isa 6–8. One very significant piece by Hartenstein discusses Isa 8:5–8 from this perspective.¹² This textual unit addresses judgment on Judah following the announcement of judgment upon Damascus and Samaria in 8:1–4:¹³

And YHWH spoke to me again as follows:
 Because this people has rejected the gently flowing waters of Shiloah,
 and rejoice¹⁴ with Rezin and the son of Remaliah;
 therefore, my Lord is bringing up against them
 the powerful and mighty waters of the river,
 the king of Assyria, and all his glory (ואת־מלך־אשור ואת־כל־כבודו);
 and it will rise above all its channels
 and it will go up over all its banks;
 it will pass on into Judah flooding and overflowing,
 it will reach up to the neck;
 and its outspread wings (מטות כנפיו) will fill the breadth of your land, O Immanuel.

This text is replete with allusions to Neo-Assyrian rhetoric and ideology. First, the text uses the metaphor of a flood to illustrate the devastating power of Assyria. Assyria is the strong and mighty waters of the river, i. e., the Euphrates that the Lord is bringing upon Jerusalem. Verse 7 immediately explains the meaning of this metaphor: the king of Assyria.

This water imagery is well known from Assyrian royal inscriptions. Esarhadon, for example, describes his military campaign as follows:

Wohnort JHWHs in der Jerusalemer Kulturtradition, WMANT 75 (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1997); idem, *Das Archiv des verborgenen Gottes: Studien zur Unheilsprophetie Jesajas und zur Zionstheologie der Psalmen in assyrischer Zeit*, Biblisch-Theologische Studien 74 (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 2011); Reinhard MÜLLER, *Ausgebliebene Einsicht: Jesajas 'Verstockungsauftrag' (Jes 6,9–11) und die jüdische Politik am Ende des 8. Jahrhunderts*, Biblisch-Theologische Studien 124 (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 2012).

¹² See on this in more detail Konrad SCHMID, "The Origins of the Book of Isaiah," in *Sibyls, Scriptures, and Scrolls: John Collins at Seventy*, ed. J. BADEN et al., JSJSup 175 (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 1166–185.

¹³ Nonetheless, it is not altogether clear to what 8:5–8 should be related. Menahem HARAN, "Isaiah as a Prophet to Samaria and His Memoirs," in *Genesis, Isaiah and Psalms*, ed. Katherine DELL et al., VTSup 135 (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 95–103, 100, paraphrases the text as follows: "In the second stanza (5–10) God further says to Isaiah that, since 'this people,' which is Ephraim, 'has spurned the gently flowing waters of Siloam' that symbolize the Davidic dynasty, and rejoices with the son of Remaliah, God will bring on Ephraim 'the mighty, massive waters of the Euphrates, the king of Assyria,' that shall 'flow over all its channels, and overflow and pass [even] through Judah reaching up to the neck' – reach only – and 'his outspread wings will fill the breadth of your land,' but nothing is said of destroying Judah."

¹⁴ See the textual discussion in J. J. M. ROBERTS, *First Isaiah: A Commentary*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015), 132.

“Like a raging eagle, with outspread wings, I went like the flood (*abūbāniš*) in front of my army.”¹⁵

This passage is also relevant for the second metaphorical element of Isa 8:5–8 borrowed from Assyrian rhetoric, the outspread wings of an eagle. For the translation and interpretation of Isa 8:8 these “outspread wings” (מטות כנפיו) have long presented a problem: how does this fit with the imagery of the flood? Some Bibles and commentaries therefore decided to translate (מטות כנפיו) as “outer margins” – linking them to the flood that will cover the breadth of the land.

However, the Neo-Assyrian parallel of the Esarhaddon text shows that the images of the eagle and the flood go very well with one another and seem to have been adopted here. The king of Assyria can appear as a flood and as an eagle at the same time. But how should one interpret this reception of Assyrian motifs? Notably, Isa 8:5–7 does not change the Assyrian rhetoric in the book of Isaiah. When talking of the king of Assyria and his power, the book of Isaiah consciously adapts the Assyrian ideology. The king of Assyria indeed comes up against Judah as a flood and as an eagle.

The implicit theological argument behind that usage is as follows: God himself summons the Assyrian king and brings him and his army against Israel and Judah. And because the Assyrian king is sent by God himself, his propaganda is acceptable even from a Judean point of view.

A specific, even dramatic theological argument is provided by the wording “the king of Assyria, and all his glory (את־מלך אשור ואת־כל־כבודו)” used in 8:7. This expression looks like a gloss, and it even might be one because it goes beyond the flood image and explains what the flood denotes: the king of Assyria. Nevertheless, whether a gloss or not, the interpretation applied by the expression to the context is obviously correct.¹⁶ The important element is the mention of the king’s “glory” (כבוד). The king of Assyria’s “glory” is important because it steers the perspective back to Isa 6:3, where the term “glory” also appears (in addition to “fill” and “this people”). In Isa 6:3, the entire world is filled with the “glory” of God or, to be more precise: the whole world is identified as God’s glory. In Isa 8:7 the “glory” of the king of Assyria impresses Judah; כבוד functions here as the Hebrew equivalent for the Akkadian term *melammu*, “radiance.” “Instead of Yhwh’s ‘glory,’ Assyria’s ‘radiance’ appears – God himself having given it space.”¹⁷

¹⁵ Nin. E II, 6–10, Rylke BORGER, *Die Inschriften Asarhaddons, König von Assyrien, AfO 9 (Osnabrück: Biblio Verl, 1967): 65.*

¹⁶ The LXX has καὶ τὸ πολὺ τὸν βασιλεῖα τῶν Ἀσσυρίων καὶ τὴν δόξαν αὐτοῦ and thus connects this expression more smoothly into its context.

¹⁷ HARTENSTEIN, *Archiv*, 11. Cf. H. G. M. WILLIAMSON, “From One Degree of Glory to Another: Themes and Theology in Isaiah,” in *In Search of True Wisdom*, ed. Edward BALL, JSOTSup 300 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1999), 174–95; idem, *Holy, Holy, Holy: The Story of a Liturgical Formula*, Julius-Wellhausen-Vorlesung 1 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2008), 32 n. 40.

<p>Isa 6:3: And one called to another and said: “Holy, holy, holy is YHWH Sabaoth; the fullness of the whole earth is <i>his glory</i> (כבודו).”</p>	<p>Isa 8:7: Therefore, my Lord is bringing up against them the powerful and mighty waters of the river, the king of Assyria, and all <i>his glory</i> (כבודו).</p>
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To highlight this as clearly as possible: The correspondence between Isa 6:3 and 8:7 argues that God’s cosmic and universal glory temporarily recedes with regard to Judah in favor of the glory of the king of Assyria.

In terms of its logical structure, this statement is not completely unprecedented in the theological evaluation of political events in the Levant. In the Mesha Stela, the king of Moab states:

Omri was king of Israel and oppressed Moab over many days because Chemosh was angry with his land.

The theological reason for Moab’s oppression is similar to the argumentation in Isa 6–8: Chemosh is angry with his own land of Moab, and only for this reason is Israel, guided by its own god Yahweh, able to oppress Moab severely.¹⁸

A remarkable difference takes place, however, in Isa 6:3 and 8:7. These verses do not operate within the concept of Yhwh’s anger, but with his glory, which he temporarily withdraws. “Anger” is, so to speak, a divine emotion. God’s “glory,” however, is the substance of God’s earthly presence itself. God changes the overall nature of his presence to the cosmos: his yielding to the Assyrians is a cosmic phenomenon.

Another element stemming from Assyrian propaganda appears in Isa 6:11, as Reinhard Müller has shown:

ואמר עד-מתי אדני ויאמר עד אשר אם-שאו ערים מאין יושב ובתים מאין אדם והאדמה תשאה שממה:

And I said, “How long, O Lord?” And he said: “Until cities lie waste without inhabitant, and houses without people, and the land is utterly desolate.”

Scholars have often claimed that 6:11 postdates the catastrophe of 587 BCE because of the emphasis on the motif of the “devastated land.” However, as Müller has convincingly argued, this motif fits very well into the Neo-Assyrian rhetoric used in vassal treaties from the seventh century, which also announce the devastation of the land for not complying with a treaty. Isaiah 6:11 may even be aware of such punishments by the Neo-Assyrian army of disloyal vassals, such as Mat’iel from Arpad in 740 BCE. What kind of prophetic hermeneutics are behind these receptions and adaptations of Neo-Assyrian propaganda in the book of Isaiah? What can one learn about the self-understanding of the prophetic

¹⁸ See Reinhard G. KRATZ, “Chemosh’s Wrath and Yahweh’s No: Ideas of Divine Wrath in Moab and Israel,” in *Divine Wrath and Divine Mercy in the World of Antiquity*, ed. Reinhard G. KRATZ and Hermann SPIECKERMANN, FAT II/33 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 92–121.

authors of the book of Isaiah from their adaptations of Neo-Assyrian material, in which they – to put it bluntly – accept and integrate the enemy’s propaganda into their own theological argumentation?

Two points shall be discussed here, though others can probably be made as well. One concerns the pragmatics of Isa 6–8, the other the theology of this cross-cultural reception. First, for the pragmatics of Isa 6–8, it is crucial to see that neither Isa 6 nor Isa 8 are meant to be proclaimed to those it actually concerns, that is the Jerusalemites or Judah. Isaiah 6 and 8 are divine messages addressed and revealed solely and exclusively to the prophet Isaiah.¹⁹

But of course, God’s message for Isaiah is now made available to the readers of his book. How is this astonishing feature of Isa 6 and 8 to be interpreted? Why does the book not claim that Isaiah should forward this message to his people? That is generally the basic task of a prophet: they are messengers.

The answer seems to be the following: These texts in Isa 6 and 8 do not serve the purpose of informing the public; they serve as theological legitimation of the prophet’s message of doom for the reader. This clearly is also the rationale behind the famous divine command to Isaiah in Isa 6:9–10 to prevent the people from understanding his message. Such a command apparently presupposes the failure of his prophetic activity and reflects upon it. Isaiah 6 and 8 inform the reader of two things with regard to Isaiah: Isaiah’s prophecy against Judah was not his own invention, and the failure of this prophecy was part of the plan from the very beginning.

And this leads to the second point. The implicit theological arguments presented above apparently serve the same task of legitimizing the prophet, particularly in the eyes of the reader of his book. They provide a theological argument for why God, whose glory is all over the cosmos, can allow the success of Assyria’s military campaigns and its plans to destroy Judah. According to Isa 6 and 8, Assyria is a divine tool.²⁰

Of course, this idea is not limited to Isa 6 and 8 but also appears elsewhere in the book of Isaiah, most prominently, for instance in Isa 10:²¹

הוי אשור שכט אפי ומטה־הוא בידם זעמי:
בגוי חנף אשלחנו ועל־עם עברתי אצונו לשלל שלל ולבו בז ולשימו מרמס כחמר חוצות:

¹⁹ Cf. Odil Hannes STECK, “Beiträge zum Verstehen von Jes 7,10–14 und 8,4,” in *Wahrnehmungen Gottes im Alten Testament*, TB 70 (Munich: Kaiser, 1982), 187–203, esp. 200 n. 50.

²⁰ See Konrad SCHMID, “Zeit und Geschichte als Determinanten biblischer Theologie: Untersuchungen zum Wandel des Geschichtsverständnisses im Alten Testament,” in *Schriftgelehrte Traditionsliteratur: Fallstudien zur innerbiblischen Schriftauslegung im Alten Testament*, FAT 77 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011), 299–321.

²¹ See on this Peter MACHINIST, “‘Ah Assyria ...’ (Isaiah 10:5ff): Isaiah’s Assyrian Polemic Revisited,” in *Not Only History: Proceedings of the Conference in Honor of Mario Liverani Held in Sapienza-Università di Roma, Dipartimento di Scienze dell’Antichità, 20–21 April 2009* (Wirona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2016), 183–217, for the ambiguities in 10:5–6 see 188–90.

Ah, Assyria, the rod of my anger, the club in their hands is my fury! Against a godless nation I send him, and against the people of my wrath I command him to plunder (its) plunder and to take (its) booty, and to tread them down like the mire of the streets. (Isa 10:5–6)

It is easy to see that Isa 10 seems to be earlier than Isa 6–8, as Isa 6–8 synthesizes the concept of Isa 10 in a more fundamental way by integrating it into the interplay between God's and Assyria's כבוד. Note further that Isa 10 still calls upon the concept of God's anger, so its argument is considerably more traditional than Isa 6–8, quite similar to the Mesha Stela. Furthermore, Isa 10 probably provides the source for מִהַר שָׁלַל חֵשׁ בְּנֹי in Isa 8:1, which also suggests the historical priority of Isa 10 over Isa 6–8.

The notion of God's glory belongs to the core elements of the traditional Jerusalemite theology of the first temple, as many texts especially from the Psalms suggest. Isaiah 6 and 8 activate this concept by means of an intercultural and interreligious argument: God's glory is of cosmic dimension and prevalent. But there are also competing glories in the world, such as the one of the king of Assyria. These competing glories, however, can only be effective and successful, if God provides space for them. Isaiah 6 and 8 thus attempt to reconcile the theological notion of God's universal glory with the empirical notion of the king of Assyria's glory in a way allowing God to limit his glory.

If the observation is correct that Isa 6 and 8 draw upon the notion of God's anger in Isa 10, then one can recognize the theological development from Isa 10 to Isa 6 and Isa 8 as a systematization and rationalization of how to understand God and his actions in the world. Isaiah 6 and 8 balance their notion of God between the historical experience of Assyria's military success and the acknowledgment of the theological legitimacy of Assyria's power. By adopting the Assyrian concept of *melammu* as the counterpart of the meaning of כבוד in Hebrew,²² Isa 6 and 8 take a decisive step towards that inclusive notion of monotheism that has become so important in the history of biblical literature.

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²² See Thomas WAGNER, *Gottes Herrlichkeit: Bedeutung und Verwendung des Begriffs kabôd im Alten Testament*, VTSup 151 (Leiden: Brill, 2011).

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