

Research Article

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“A Throne Will Be Established in Steadfast Love”: Welcoming Refugees and the Davidic Kingdom in Isaiah 16:1–5

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Abstract: All commentators agree that Isaiah 16:1–5 is about refugees, yet the passage’s implications for forced migration have not yet been investigated. This article argues that it contains a prophetic call by Isaiah, speaking with God’s authority, that Jerusalem should welcome the Moabite refugees who have fled there for safety. Isaiah tells Jerusalem that by welcoming these refugees they are participating in the coming of a Kingdom and a Davidic King who will rule with justice, righteousness, love, and faithfulness.

Keywords: Isaiah, refugees, forced migration, social justice, messianic prophecy

“Behold now, we have heard that the kings of the house of Israel are merciful kings”

(1 Kings 20:31¹)

All commentators on Isaiah 16:1–5 agree that it concerns refugees.² Yet, despite this unanimity, the oracle is almost completely absent from debates about forced migration and the Bible. Astonishingly, even a book titled *The Prophets Speak on Forced Migration* contains no mention of this passage.³ This remarkable absence is probably due to two causes. First, most biblical scholarship on forced migration focuses on the experiences of Israel and Judah in exile, not the experiences of non-Israelite refugees fleeing to Israel.⁴ Second, many who seek an immigration ethic in the Bible are focused on the situation at the United States–Mexico border, where migrants are usually described as “undocumented” immigrants, rather than as “refugees.”⁵

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from the ESV.

² For places the word “refugee” appears in connection with Isaiah 16:1–5, see *inter alia*: Goswell, “Isaiah 16,” 93, 94, 97, 99, 102; Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 1–39*, 295, 298; Fitz, “A Significant Other,” 82, 120, 122, 138, 147, 149, 151; Wildberger, *Isaiah*, 105; Watts, *Isaiah 1–33*, 279, 280, 282, 284, 287; Seitz, *Isaiah 1–39*, 139; Goldingay, *Isaiah for Everyone*, 65; Roberts, *First Isaiah*, 235, 237; Smothers, “Isaiah 15–16,” 71, 74, 79, 82; Power, “The Prophecy of Isaias against Moab (Is. 15, 1–16, 5),” 441; Kaiser, *Isaiah 13–39*, 70; Motyer, *Prophecy of Isaiah*, 151.

³ Boda et al., *The Prophets Speak on Forced Migration*.

⁴ See *inter alia*: Smith-Christopher, *A Biblical Theology of Exile*; Ahn and Middlemas, *By the Irrigation Canals of Babylon*; Lim, “Exile and Migration;” Rowlands, “Temporality, Dispossession and the Search for the Good;” Crouch, “Migration, Political Power and the Book of Jeremiah;” Davidson, “The Imperial End;” Strine, “Embracing Asylum Seekers and Refugees;” Snyder, “The Art of Wounded Hope.”

⁵ A vibrant debate started by Daniel Carroll and James Hoffmeier continues to this day. See Carroll R., *Christians at the Border*, 2008; James Hoffmeier’s critique of Carroll’s argument in *The Immigration Crisis*; James Frank’s comparison of the two views in “Complementary Critiques;” Carroll’s response in an updated edition: *Christians at the Border*, 2013; Robert Heimburger’s arbitration in *God and the Illegal Alien*; Carroll’s further elaboration (which does not advance his previous argument much)

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There is, however, a growing body of literature that inquires what the Bible has to say to those who are not refugees themselves, but are in a position to host them.⁶ So far this conversation has mentioned Isaiah 16:1–5 only twice: a short paragraph by Wright and Măcelaru that follows the line of argument I am expanding here,⁷ and two pages in the middle of Houston's book.⁸ Houston, however, reads the passage as a *refusal* to grant asylum, which I will argue is a misunderstanding.

This article contends that Isaiah 16:1–5 commands Jerusalem to welcome the Moabite refugees who have fled there for safety. The prophet tells them, moreover, that obedience in welcoming the refugees will speed the coming of an ideal kingdom, ruled by a Davidic king in faithfulness, love, justice, and righteousness. I begin by situating Isaiah 16:1–5 in its literary context and genre. I will reject the interpretation that the oracle speaks ironically, without any intention to welcome the Moabites. Then I will show how Isaiah 16:4b–5 can be at once a prophecy of hope regarding the coming of a new Davidic king and a call for Judah to participate in bringing about that king's coming. Finally, I will conclude with some reflections on the contemporary relevance of this passage.

1 The genre of Isaiah 15–16 and previous scholarship

This article will focus primarily on the text as a literary unity, complemented by an awareness of the broader historical context in which it was composed.⁹ Isaiah 16:1–5 is part of a literary unit that spans Isaiah 15–16. Otto Procksch famously called this passage the “problem child of exegesis” (*Schmerzskind der Exegese*).¹⁰ Smothers writes that “virtually every aspect of the poem about Moab in Isaiah 15–16 remains in dispute.”¹¹ Perhaps the only thing that commands unanimous agreement is that the passage concerns Moabite refugees fleeing to Jerusalem for asylum. It is this kernel of consensus that makes the text valuable for forced migration studies.

Isaiah 15–16 belongs to a genre in prophetic literature known as “Oracles against the Nations” (OAN); the book of Isaiah's are gathered together into a collection that makes up the bulk of chapters 13–23. Jones warns that “the attitude that they express toward the nations is not, however, unequivocally negative as the appellation Oracles *against* the Nations might suggest; indeed, on occasion the tenor of the texts is positive (e.g. Isa 18:7; 19:19–25).”¹² This is especially true of Isaiah 15–16, which, as John Barton points out, is “not an oracle against a foreign nation but a lament for it.”¹³ Additionally, Goldingay cautions against any assumption that these oracles are actually addressed to the nations of which they speak: “in most cases, as far as we know, they aren't delivered to the nations to which they refer. They are delivered to the Judahites, like the rest of the prophecies.”¹⁴ We must not assume these oracles concerning the nations to be entirely negative, and must be attentive to what the Judahites – the likely intended audience – were expected to learn from them. What might the latter have been? Three primary lessons are suggested: (1) do

in *The Bible and Borders*. Apart from that debate, see Swain, “A Judeo-Christian Approach to “Comprehensive” Immigration Reform;” R, M, and Martinez, *Immigrant Neighbors among Us*; Hamilton, *Jesus, King of Strangers*.

⁶ This conversation includes, *inter alia*: chapters 6, 7, and 8 of Snyder, *Asylum-Seeking, Migration and Church*; Houston, *You Shall Love the Stranger as Yourself*; Bauman et al., *Seeking Refuge*, although this book is still America-centred; Glanville, *Adopting the Stranger As Kindred in Deuteronomy*; Hollenbach, *Humanity in Crisis*; Wright and Măcelaru, “The Refugee Crisis – A Shared Human Condition;” Escobar, “Refugees;” Glanville and Glanville, *Refuge Reimagined*.

⁷ Wright and Măcelaru, “The Refugee Crisis – A Shared Human Condition,” 97.

⁸ Houston, *You Shall Love the Stranger as Yourself*, 84–5.

⁹ I will refer to the text's compositor as Isaiah for convenience, without implying that Isaiah is the sole or final author.

¹⁰ See e.g. Kaiser, *Isaiah 13–39*, 60; Power, “The Prophecy of Isaiah against Moab (Is. 15, 1–16, 5),” 435n1; van Zyl, *The Moabites*, 20. Citation from Procksch, *Jesaia I*, 208.

¹¹ Smothers, “Isaiah 15–16,” 70.

¹² Jones, *Howling over Moab*, 57.

¹³ Barton, *Isaiah 1–39*, 86.

¹⁴ Goldingay, *The Theology of the Book of Isaiah*, 38.

not be arrogant like the nations¹⁵ and (2) do not turn to them for support,¹⁶ because (3) Israel's God is supreme over even the most powerful ones, and it is his plan, not theirs, that "controls the course of history."¹⁷

These are not the only aspects of OANs, however. What one immediately notices when reading Isaiah 15–16 is that it expresses grief about a calamity that has befallen Moab, a nation to the east of Judah situated on the other side of the Dead Sea. This leads to ask two questions: what happened to Moab, and when did it happen? Here the problems begin. While some scholars argue, on the basis of Isaiah 15:7, that what befell Moab was a famine,¹⁸ the majority see Isaiah 15:1,9 and 16:4,8 as evidence of a military attack.¹⁹ If we side with the latter, the question of *who* attacked Moab remains disputed. Some have suggested it was the Assyrians,²⁰ some the Amorites,²¹ some the Edomites,²² some pass over the question without comment,²³ and many frankly admit that the passage does not give enough details to reach a conclusion with any confidence.²⁴ For our purposes it is best simply to conclude, with Blenkinsopp, that "whatever the nature of the disaster, it led to the flight of refugees southward."²⁵

Even less certainty surrounds the date of this disaster; as Hans Wildberger observes, "there has been little success in identifying the historical background of these two chapters that deal with Moab [...] with any degree of certainty."²⁶ Erika Fitz pertinently observes that "the poem presupposes that Judah is in a position to offer protection. This requires [...] that Judah be a country with enough strength and independence to offer asylum."²⁷

Hyun Chul Paul Kim's analysis of the OAN genre suggests that these are the wrong questions to be asking of Isaiah 15–16. Part of the purpose of the OANs, he argues, is to abstract from historical particulars, offering a message that "applies to different audiences across generations and geography."²⁸ Alec Motyer similarly observes that the text of Isaiah 15–16 draws attention away from historical particulars: "had Isaiah considered that the oracle needed a clear historical setting, he would have given it. But the wording throughout is non-specific and even the foe is the unnamed 'rulers of the nations' (16:8). Attention is focused on content not on occasion."²⁹ This point will be relevant to the question of contemporary application, which will be revisited below.

¹⁵ "What is of interest to the shapers of the material is God's judgment over all forms of human pride" (Seitz, *Isaiah 1–39*, 140).

¹⁶ "The thrust of the oracle is to discourage any who would be tempted to join with proud Moab for purpose of mutual security" (Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah, Chapters 1–39*, 336).

¹⁷ Kim, "The Oracles against the Nations," 68.

¹⁸ E.g. Jenkins, "The Development of the Isaiah Tradition in Is 13–23," 242.

¹⁹ Thus, Hayes and Irvine, *Isaiah, the Eighth-Century Prophet*, 240; Roberts, *First Isaiah*, 229; Fitz, "A Significant Other," 131. Smothers makes sense of 15:7 by suggesting that the invasion "resulted in the destruction of cities and the accompanying end to the land's fertility" (Smothers, "Isaiah 15–16," 74).

²⁰ Hayes and Irvine, *Isaiah, the Eighth-Century Prophet*, 240; Power, "The Prophecy of Isaias against Moab (Is. 15, 1–16, 5)," 443.

²¹ Gottwald, *All the Kingdoms of the Earth*, 173.

²² Power, "The Prophecy of Isaias against Moab (Is. 15, 1–16, 5)," 449.

²³ Goswell, "Isaiah 16."

²⁴ "No evidence exists to suggest that Assyria invaded the country at this time or that a large army moved down the Jordan toward Moab or approached her from the south" (Watts, *Isaiah 1–33*, 287). See also Roberts, *First Isaiah*, 229.

²⁵ Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 1–39*, 298.

²⁶ Wildberger, *Isaiah*, 122. For similar observations, see Seitz, *Isaiah 1–39*, 140; Kaiser, *Isaiah 13–39*, 65. John Watts notes that "the invasion that befalls Moab is not documented historically," but tentatively suggests that "the reference in 14:28 to the death of Ahaz is a signal that these chapters are to be placed in the following reign, that of Hezekiah," around 718 BCE (Watts, *Isaiah 1–33*, 284).

²⁷ Fitz, "A Significant Other," 123.

²⁸ Kim, "The Oracles against the Nations," 71.

²⁹ Motyer, *Prophecy of Isaiah*, 148–9.

2 Why Isaiah 15–16 is not ironic

Kim also proposes that the OANs occasionally promote “radical, even paradoxical, inclusion of foreigners and outsiders.”³⁰ This, however, is not universally agreed. The tone of grief for Moab’s plight in Isaiah 15–16 is relatively unusual; this has led a number of interpreters to argue that the grief must be ironic – that Isaiah is in fact mocking Moab and exulting in its devastation. The two most influential Protestant reformers, Martin Luther and John Calvin, both took this view;³¹ in recent scholarship it is supported by John Hayes and Stuart Irvine,³² Fitz,³³ Goswell,³⁴ Blenkinsopp,³⁵ and Brian Jones.³⁶ According to Jones, “the irony of the poem consists chiefly in the inverting of the intention of the lament genre. On the surface the poem seems to lament the troubles suffered by the Moabites; its true intention, however, is to mock the suffering of the Moabites.”³⁷

Jones and others advance the following arguments in favour of understanding Isaiah 15–16 ironically:

1. Irony is used elsewhere in prophetic literature, including the book of Isaiah itself (e.g. 14:4–21; 44:12–17), and therefore “such an attitude would not have been unusual or unexpected.”³⁸
2. When Isaiah 16:6 condemns Moab’s pride, this “cues the reader that the sympathy that follows is not genuine,” inviting the reader to re-read Isaiah 15 in this light.³⁹
3. Isaiah 16:14 shows that the text is prophesying a future event, and “one simply does not offer condolences for hypothetical tragedies.”⁴⁰
4. All except three of the destroyed Moabite towns listed in Isaiah 15 formerly belonged to Israel. Because these need not have been named – in fact the “number of geographical names” is “remarkable”⁴¹ – this suggests that they are named in order to taunt Moab: “what Moab did to Israel is now visited back on him.”⁴²
5. The many parallels between Isaiah 15–16 and Jeremiah 48 make it almost certain that one of the texts influenced the other. In Jeremiah 48, there is no sympathy for Moab and the mocking intent is obvious. This parallel passage “rendered the subtle irony of Isaiah 15–16 obvious and unmistakable in the recasting of the poem, and this may suggest that he or she recognized the presence of intended irony.”⁴³
6. According to Jones, however, the strongest argument is the “conflict between the negative attitude toward Moab expressed nearly everywhere in the [Old Testament] and the deeply sympathetic attitude expressed in Isaiah 15–16.”⁴⁴ Moab is one of the most hated enemies of Israel and Judah; in particular, “the story of Ehud [Judges 3:12–30] and the story of Lot and his daughters [Genesis 19:30–38] satirize the Moabites by means of sexual and/or scatological imagery [...] [this] testifies to a widely shared delight in deriding Moab with low humor.”⁴⁵

Why, if the evidence for irony in Isaiah 15–16 is so strong, have so many read the poem as straightforwardly sympathetic to Moab? Jones suggests that confessionally Christian readers look up to biblical

³⁰ Kim, “The Oracles against the Nations,” 71.

³¹ Luther, *Lectures on Isaiah, Volume One*, 1:146–53; Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Isaiah*, 1:468–96.

³² Hayes and Irvine, *Isaiah, the Eighth-Century Prophet*.

³³ Fitz, “A Significant Other.”

³⁴ Goswell, “Isaiah 16,” 93.

³⁵ Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 1–39*.

³⁶ Jones, *Howling over Moab*.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 122.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 127.

³⁹ Fitz, “A Significant Other,” 128.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ Watts, *Isaiah 1–33*, 286.

⁴² Fitz, “A Significant Other,” 132.

⁴³ Jones, *Howling over Moab*, 137.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 154–5.

authors like Isaiah as inspiring examples of the “virtues of respect, restraint, tolerance, and even love for one’s enemies;” “the notion that the prophets should engage in biting satire and damning vitriol does not fit well with this image.”⁴⁶ He continues:

If we are to read the poem ironically [...] we must accept an image of the prophet as a satirist [...]. We must be ready to hate the Moabites, to wish them destroyed, to rejoice and gloat over their misfortune. Then we shall be suitably prepared to catch the poet’s meaning in the confession, “My bowels growl like a lyre for Moab” (16:11).⁴⁷

Despite Jones’s arguments, this ironic reading of Isaiah 15–16 is misguided for several reasons. Let us begin by offering a counter-argument for each of the points noted in favour of such a reading:

1. Other examples of irony in prophetic literature are much more obvious than gloating over a fallen enemy by means of satirical lament. Jones himself admits that “the prophets present no obvious examples of ironic first-person expressions of sympathy, while straightforward, first-person expressions of sympathy do occasionally occur.”⁴⁸
2. Isaiah 16:6 can be read otherwise than as a sign that Isaiah’s sympathy is not genuine. Just three examples: Motyer reads it as a sign that the Moabites refused the offer of asylum (which he suggests is made in 16:4b–5);⁴⁹ Roberts reads it as a simple acknowledgement that the refugees are not innocent;⁵⁰ and, for Goldingay, it is simply “bringing out the reason for the calamity that has come upon the [Moabites].”⁵¹
3. The majority of scholars do not take Isaiah 16:14 to mean that the preceding poem predicts future events. Rather, they contend that the poem was written when a calamity befell Moab, and later incorporated into a prophecy (16:13–14) about a future calamity.⁵²
4. Several scholars have noted that the towns (at least, the ones we know the location of) are listed geographically from north to south, probably describing the progression of the attack as well as the route by which the Moabites fled.⁵³
5. It is not true that the parallel passage in Jeremiah 48 expresses no sympathy for Moab, as is made clear in v. 17a: “Grieve [יגו] for him, all you who are around him, and all who know his name.”
6. It would be more accurate to characterise Israel’s attitude towards Moab as complex and constantly changing – a love–hate relationship like that of England and France.⁵⁴ While the story of Lot and his daughters does depict Moab as having a shameful origin, it also grants Moab kinship with Israel, since Lot was Abraham’s and Isaac’s cousin. Likewise, the humorous ending to the story of Ehud need not be read as a slur against Moab. The same story describes Moab as YHWH’s vehicle to punish Israel for her sins (Judges 3:12); Israel is the shameful one. Although many passages are negative towards Moab, this is not unusual for a foreign nation in the Old Testament. Yet other passages show respect for Moab; thus, Deut 2:9 “avers that YHWH had deeded Moab its land and commands Israel to respect its borders.”⁵⁵ Even one of the most hostile laws against the Moabites, Deut 23:4–7, still implies “that Moabites live in Israel and seek inclusion in its community.”⁵⁶ The entire book of Ruth portrays a Moabite in a highly positive

⁴⁶ Ibid., 161, 157.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 161.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 134.

⁴⁹ Motyer, *Prophecy of Isaiah*, 152–3.

⁵⁰ Roberts, *First Isaiah*, 237.

⁵¹ Goldingay, *Isaiah*, 110.

⁵² See e.g. Seitz, *Isaiah 1–39*, 140; Smothers, “Isaiah 15–16,” 83; Hayes and Irvine, *Isaiah, the Eighth-Century Prophet*, 246; Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 1–39*, 298.

⁵³ See e.g. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah, Chapters 1–39*, 337–8; Smothers, “Isaiah 15–16,” 74. Note, however, that Hayes and Irvine and Roberts disagree that the towns have such a geographical layout (see Roberts, *First Isaiah*, 234; Hayes and Irvine, *Isaiah, the Eighth-Century Prophet*, 241).

⁵⁴ Fitz, “A Significant Other.”

⁵⁵ Ibid., 1.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

light (a fact that Jones attempts unsuccessfully to minimise).⁵⁷ Ruth 4:21–22 makes clear that the Davidic line itself, the most prominent family in all Israel, has Moabite ancestry. There could be no stronger affirmation of respect for a Moabite.

These counter-points make a non-ironic reading of Isaiah 15–16 plausible, but do not confirm that it is the correct reading. This requires some further points.

The first is that Isaiah as a whole expresses a deep compassion for the poor and vulnerable. While Jones and Fitz do an excellent job of situating Isaiah 15–16 in its immediate context as an OAN and drawing out the broader significance of Moab in the Old Testament, neither take time to situate the text within First Isaiah, or within the book of Isaiah. One of the most prominent themes of Isaiah is social justice – the mandate to care for the poor, marginalised, and oppressed.⁵⁸ Indeed, it is more than a theme – it is presented as integral to Yahwism, such that without it one cannot be said to be a faithful Yahwist. As Blaženka Scheuer puts it: “Isaiah forcefully claims that worship of Yhwh is inseparable from social justice. [...] For Isaiah, the corruption of the society and the exploitation of the weak obliterate the very essence of the cult.”⁵⁹ This is apparent already from chapter one, which dismisses cultic sacrifices as worthless by themselves: “What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices? says the LORD; I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of well-fed beasts; I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs, or of goats” (Isa 1:11). It then makes clear what is missing: “Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your deeds from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; *seek justice* [חֲשֹׁפֶט], *correct oppression*; *bring justice* [שֹׁפֵט] *to the fatherless, plead the widow’s cause*” (Isa 1:16–17). Although Isaiah does not mention the stranger here, readers would have doubtless heard the resonance of the triad “orphan, widow, and stranger” which appears often throughout the Old Testament (Ex 22:21–23; Deut 10:18; 14:29; 16:11,14; 24:17,19; 26:12,13; 27:19; Ps 94:6; 146:9; Jer 7:6; 22:3; Ezek 22:7; Zech 7:10; Mal 3:5) and seems to mean “anyone who is vulnerable and cannot take care of themselves.” Isaiah’s concern is for “those who themselves have no power or legal means to assert their claims”; refugees clearly belong to this category.⁶⁰

In light of this deep concern for the vulnerable and afflicted, it would be highly incongruous for Isaiah 15–16 to counsel Jerusalem to refuse asylum to Moabite refugees fleeing from destruction; such advice would effectively condemn them to violent death at the hands of the invading army. Yet an ironic interpretation of Isaiah 15–16 requires such a reading of Isaiah 16:6.⁶¹ Indeed, Fitz claims that the verse “rebuffs the request,”⁶² while Jones argues that

the clear implication [of Isa 16:6] in the context is that Judah will not (should not, from the audience’s temporal perspective) provide the requested help. Moab’s suffering is the just reward for its attitude and actions. Yahweh has brought low the haughty nation, and its petitions fail to arouse the sympathy of rulers both human (16:6) and divine (16:12). The Judeans will offer no aid, for to do so would contradict the divine will.⁶³

⁵⁷ Jones, *Howling over Moab*, 151–2.

⁵⁸ See Weinfeld, *Social Justice in Ancient Israel and in the Ancient Near East*; Gray, *Rhetoric and Social Justice in Isaiah*. This identification had already been made by Weber (“A distinctive concern with social reform is characteristic of Israelite prophets” [Weber, *Economy and Society*, 443]). Note that Goldingay disagrees that חֲשֹׁפֶט and צָדִיק are equivalent to modern-day social justice (*The Theology of the Book of Isaiah*, 21). But the quibble is more about what social justice means today than what חֲשֹׁפֶט and צָדִיק meant in the biblical context.

⁵⁹ Scheuer, “Sin and Punishment in the Book of Isaiah,” 251.

⁶⁰ Barton, “Ethics in Isaiah of Jerusalem,” 11.

⁶¹ Or as some scholars suggest, 16:6 is Jerusalem refusing to offer asylum (Seitz, *Isaiah 1–39*, 139; Childs, *Isaiah*, 132; Smothers, “Isaiah 15–16,” 82). Yet in context this would mean that Isaiah implicitly agrees with it; he does not offer a counter-cultural criticism of Jerusalem’s decision, but joins the mainstream position, as he does throughout his prophetic ministry. Indeed, this is the way all Old Testament prophecy works: flowing like a dead fish with the current of mainstream opinion, reflecting the opinions of the prevailing culture (irony).

⁶² Fitz, “A Significant Other,” 135.

⁶³ Jones, *Howling over Moab*, 264.

To interpret Isaiah 16:6 in this way, as a refusal of welcome to refugees, puts it in conflict with what is arguably the strongest and most prevalent theme in Isaiah.

Moreover, those who interpret 16:6 as Jerusalem's refusal of aid also interpret Isaiah 16:3–4a (and in some cases Isa 16:3–5) as a *request* for aid from the Moabite refugees. Both those who read the passage ironically⁶⁴ and a number of other scholars favour this interpretation.⁶⁵ It has even made it into the NIV, which translates Isaiah 16:3a as, “‘Make up your mind,’ *Moab says*. ‘Render a decision’” (italics added). The words “Moab says” are nowhere in any manuscript; they are purely an interpretative gloss. If, on the other hand, Isaiah is speaking these verses to Jerusalem, an ironic reading of Isaiah 15–16 becomes impossible. One does not interrupt a sarcastic, gloating exultation over someone else's misery to command immediate action to alleviate that misery.

There are several reasons to understand Isaiah 16:3–5 as the words of Isaiah and not of Moabite emissaries.⁶⁶ First, as Jongkyung Lee notes:

the speaker is unmarked throughout Isa 16:1–5. If the speaker changes from either YHWH or the poet to the Moabites in v 3, and if noticing this change was meant to be essential for understanding the overall message of vv 3–5, one would have expected to see this change indicated in a more obvious way (see e.g. Isa 20:6; 23:4).⁶⁷

Second, Isaiah 16:4 says, “let the outcasts of Moab sojourn among you.” If the outcasts of Moab themselves were speaking, they ought to have said, “let *us* sojourn among you.” People do not generally refer to themselves in the third person, unless they have good reason to do so.⁶⁸ Indeed, the word “Moab” appears frequently throughout Isaiah 15–16, lending support to reading the poem as having a single, non-Moabite speaker.⁶⁹

Why, then, do so many scholars, even ones who do not read the poem ironically, think that Isaiah 16:3–4a is spoken by Moabites? Richard Weis suggests that it is because they have interpreted Isaiah 16:1 as being spoken *to* the Moabites, and an unmarked change in addressee makes an equally unmarked change in speaker more plausible.⁷⁰ He makes the persuasive case that this is a mistake, and Isaiah 16:1 is actually Isaiah speaking to officials at Jerusalem. He points out that the imperative “send” (שלח) is in the masculine plural, but “throughout the text Moab is usually referred to in the singular. The only reasonable plural subject is the *bēnôt mō'āb* in 16:2 and they are feminine.”⁷¹ Second, he notes that משל־ארץ שלח־יכר is often translated “send a lamb *to* the ruler of the land,” the indirect object marker (“to”) is not there in Hebrew. It is better to read it as a construct clause, “send a lamb belonging to the ruler of the land.”⁷² Third, he notes that שלח, normally translated *send*, “can refer to the act of transmittal, or letting pass, sending on, by a third party. It indubitably does so in Gen 32:19, and it perhaps does so in 2 Sam 13:17. [...] If we then translate *šilh ū* as “transmit,” 16:1 can easily be addressed to Judahite or Jerusalemite functionaries (as 16:3–4a certainly are).”⁷³

⁶⁴ Hayes and Irvine, *Isaiah, the Eighth-Century Prophet*, 242–3; Fitz, “A Significant Other,” 119; Jones, *Howling over Moab*, 260.

⁶⁵ Clements, *Isaiah 1–39*, 154; Kaiser, *Isaiah 13–39*, 72; Watts, *Isaiah 1–33*, 287; Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah, Chapters 1–39*, 340; Motyer, *Prophecy of Isaiah*, 126; Miscal, *Isaiah*, 53. Similar interpretations include Goldingay, who suggests the speaker might be the Moabite women mentioned in Isaiah 16:2 (*Isaiah for Everyone*, 66); and Childs, who bizarrely suggests it is Isaiah advising the refugees on what to say to the Judean officials (*Isaiah*, 131). Elsewhere, however, Goldingay suggests that even though it is the Moabites speaking, “the implication is that they should be welcomed, if they come” (Goldingay, *The Theology of the Book of Isaiah*, 44).

⁶⁶ That these verses are addressed to Jerusalem is not in dispute, since the imperatives are with one exception all in the feminine singular.

⁶⁷ Lee, *A Redactional Study of the Book of Isaiah 13–23*, 98.

⁶⁸ Granted the MT literally says “my outcasts” (נַדְחֵי) but almost every scholar follows the several textual variants in correcting it to “the outcasts” (נַדְחֵי). One exception is Motyer, who translates it: “let my outcasts stay with you – Moab” (*Prophecy of Isaiah*, 152). But the awkwardness and needlessness of the word “Moab” coming from a Moabite envoy only proves the point.

⁶⁹ I owe this point to Hugh Williamson.

⁷⁰ Weis, “A Definition of the Genre Massa' in the Hebrew Bible.”

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 118.

⁷² E.g. Watts, *Isaiah 1–33*, 279.

⁷³ Weis, “A Definition of the Genre Massa' in the Hebrew Bible,” 120.

This is sufficient to understand Weis' conclusion concerning Isaiah 16:3–5: "What is sometimes assumed, [...] is that these verses quote the appeal of a Moabite embassy. That, however, is a result of interpretations of 16:1 that we have found to be unnecessary. There is nothing in 16:3–4a that would counter the *a priori* assumption that the prophet speaks them."⁷⁴

This leaves us with every reason to see Isaiah 16:1–5 as spoken by Isaiah, with YHWH's authority, to the officials of Jerusalem. This is presumed by LXX, Targum, and Peshitta,⁷⁵ and in modern scholarship is widely supported.⁷⁶

3 Isaiah 16:1–5: Translation and commentary

Having established that Isaiah 15–16 is not ironic and that the prophet speaks to Jerusalem in Isaiah 16:1–5, we are in a position to examine the passage in more detail.

Several scholars consider Isaiah 16:1–5 to be the keystone of a chiasmic structure that spans the whole of Isaiah 15–16, meaning that this is where we find the rhetorical thrust of the poem.⁷⁷ Thus, Wildberger calls it the "theological center," insisting that this is "a fact that one must take into account when setting forth the interpretation of the entire collection of passages."⁷⁸ Although Lee considers Isaiah 16:1–4a a late addition, he argues that it is placed to make it "the centre of the entire section devoted to Moab."⁷⁹ In these five verses, then, we find the crucial point and purpose of Isaiah 15–16. My own translation and interpretation are as follows:

1 Transmit a lamb belonging to the ruler of the land by the desert highway⁸⁰ to the mountain of the daughter of Zion.

This verse suggests that the Moabite king has offered a lamb as a gesture of goodwill as he asks for asylum for his people. Isaiah instructs the Jerusalem officials to take it to the temple in Jerusalem ("the mountain of the daughter of Zion"⁸¹). Why a lamb? Most likely because that was Moab's most available commodity, as suggested by Num 32:4 and 2 Kgs 3:4.⁸²

2 The daughters of Moab at the fords of the Arnon are like fleeing birds, like a scattered nest.⁸³

This verse highlights the vulnerability of displaced women in particular, who are less able than men to protect themselves physically.⁸⁴ The Moabite women are compared to birds who have been driven out of

⁷⁴ Ibid., 122.

⁷⁵ See Smothers, "Isaiah 15–16," 76.

⁷⁶ See e.g. Gottwald, *All the Kingdoms of the Earth*, 174–5; Wright and Măcelaru, "The Refugee Crisis – A Shared Human Condition," 97; Roberts, *First Isaiah*, 237; Barton, *Isaiah 1–39*, 86.

⁷⁷ Goldingay, *Isaiah*, 108–9; Motyer, *Prophecy of Isaiah*, 149; Watts, *Isaiah 1–33*, 284.

⁷⁸ Wildberger, *Isaiah*, 153, 121.

⁷⁹ Lee, "Zion Should Receive the Outcasts of Moab," 101.

⁸⁰ I follow Jones here, who suggests that the variant in the Qumran Isaiah scroll (מסל rather than MT מסלע) makes better sense in a refugee context than a reference to a place "Sela" which nobody has been able to locate. He adds that the use of מסל (highway) "is especially common in prophetic material dealing with flight from or return to a homeland; see Isa 11:16; 19:23; 40:3; 49:11; 59:7; 62:10; Jer 31:21" Jones, *Howling over Moab*, 199n.98.

⁸¹ "The Biblical evidence is quite strong that *har bat sîyôn* refers specifically to the location of the Temple" (Weis, "A Definition of the Genre Massa' in the Hebrew Bible," 120–1).

⁸² See Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah, Chapters 1–39*, 341. Note that Smothers considers this interpretation "unlikely" but he gives no reasons *why* he thinks so (Smothers, "Isaiah 15–16," 80).

⁸³ Several scholars have suggested that this verse originally belonged at the end of Isaiah 15. I agree with Oswalt, however, that "there is no manuscript evidence in support of such a transposition, and it is difficult to imagine how or why it would have taken place given the difficult reading it has created" (Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah, Chapters 1–39*, 342).

⁸⁴ See Fiddian-Qasbiyeh, "Gender and Forced Migration."

their nest and scattered; the word for “fleeing” (נדד) is used again in the next verse, where it more clearly means “refugees.”

3 Give counsel! Judge favourably! Make your shadow like the night in noonday! Shelter the forced migrants! Do not expose the refugees!

Isaiah here exhorts Jerusalem to offer asylum to the Moabite refugees. The first two verbs are masculine plural, addressing the Jerusalem officials who had the power to authorise sanctuary. The remaining verbs are feminine singular, addressing Jerusalem. Although פלילה is a *hapax legomenon*, it is sufficiently similar to other, more well-known words concerning judgment and the execution of justice to allow reasonable confidence in its meaning.⁸⁵ Oswalt suggests that it “was not merely to give a neutral decision; it was to take positive action on behalf of those who had a justifiable need for deliverance.”⁸⁶

With the phrase, “Do not expose the refugees,” Isaiah instructs Jerusalem to give the Moabites something roughly equivalent to modern political sanctuary (which is distinct, as James Hoffmeier rightly cautions, from the biblical practice of sanctuary at designated cult sites⁸⁷). Whoever was attacking Moab was apparently not at war with Judah, which meant that Judah could choose to protect the Moabites within Jerusalem’s walls, where they would be safe, or to turn them over to their enemy.

4a Let the forced migrants from Moab reside in you! Be a hiding place to them from the destroyer!

The word for “forced migrants” (נדחים) is the same as in vv. 3, 4. Literally, it means “scattered ones.” In Isaiah 15:15 Moab’s “fugitives” (בריחים) fled to Zoar, using a word with similar meaning; now, these and/or other refugees flee to Jerusalem.

The word translated “reside” (גור) is the same as that traditionally rendered “sojourn”; it means to move, either permanently or temporarily, to a place in which you did not grow up, usually a foreign land. It is the verbal cognate of גר (*gēr*), which Deuteronomy uses as a legal term for a vulnerable, displaced person who is dependent on others for support.⁸⁸ Mark Glanville cautions against too close an identity between the verb and the noun, such that the verb automatically takes on the same legal meaning.⁸⁹ In this instance, however, the context makes clear that the Moabites will attain the legal status of גר, along the lines outlined in Deuteronomy, if Jerusalem welcomes them into its gates.⁹⁰

4b When⁹¹ the oppressor has ended, the devastation has ceased, and the trampler has gone from the land.

5 Then a throne will be established in steadfast love, and a judge will sit on it in faithfulness, in the tent of David, one who seeks justice and is skilful in righteousness.

These verses have been hotly disputed, giving rise to diametrically opposed interpretations. For example, Wildberger declares that “there is no way that 16:4b,5 would come from Isaiah,”⁹² while for Gottwald they are “evidently the original work of Isaiah.”⁹³ Scholars have viewed these verses as the Moabites paying the Judean king a “diplomatic compliment,”⁹⁴ or promising that Moab will assume vassal

⁸⁵ See e.g. פלילי, “something belonging to the judge; something to be assessed;” פלילה, “verdict, decision;” פלילים, “traditionally judges” (HALOT 3:932).

⁸⁶ Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah, Chapters 1–39*, 342.

⁸⁷ Hoffmeier, *The Immigration Crisis*, 80–4.

⁸⁸ Glanville, *Adopting the Stranger as Kindred in Deuteronomy*.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 100.

⁹⁰ This conclusion is supported by Kaiser (*Isaiah 13–39*, 72).

⁹¹ The translation by Hayes and Irvine of “until” is very tempting, because it seems to make the verse hang together much more coherently (*Isaiah, the Eighth-Century Prophet*, 243). But unfortunately there is no precedent anywhere else in the Old Testament for the use of כִּי as “until.”

⁹² Wildberger, *Isaiah*, 123.

⁹³ Gottwald, *All the Kingdoms of the Earth*, 173.

⁹⁴ Hayes and Irvine, *Isaiah, the Eighth-Century Prophet*, 243; Seitz, *Isaiah 1–39*, 139.

status in exchange for protection.⁹⁵ Goldingay suggests that this is an “extraordinary” instance in which Moab “expresses a trust in the secure establishment of David’s throne.”⁹⁶ But, as Goswell has noted, “the thematic similarities” with Isaiah 9:1–7 and 11:1–9 “militate against” this view.⁹⁷ Some say that this is Jerusalem’s response to Moab;⁹⁸ others consider such an interpretation impossible or “highly unlikely.”⁹⁹

As noted above, I view the implied author as the speaker throughout the passage, including here in vv. 4b–5. Yet, even among those who take this stance, there is no agreement as to why Isaiah suddenly looks to the distant future in the middle of a present crisis. Weis attempts to ameliorate the situation by translating the *וְ* at the beginning of v. 4b as “because” instead of “when,” suggesting that the invasion of Moab is now over and Isaiah is giving a reason for Jerusalem to grant asylum: “if the attacker is gone, there is less chance of bringing an attack on oneself by sheltering fugitives.”¹⁰⁰ Oswalt suggests that in these verses “Isaiah recognizes that Moab’s hope is identical with Judah’s. Both wait for a King of Israel who will somehow embody those traits which are in fact the character of God,”¹⁰¹ while Motyer interprets Isaiah as offering Moab the assurance that eschatological justice will be done, regardless of what terrible things are happening to them now: “the promises of God do not offer immunity from earth’s trials,” but Zion can offer Moab “the certainty that there will be an end, full of righteousness.”¹⁰²

None of these interpretations really makes sense of the urgency in the passage. Weis seems to assume that a long time has passed since the devastating attack in Isaiah 15, yet when Isaiah 15–16 are read as a unity (as Weis does) there is no indication that any time has passed between Isaiah 15 and Isaiah 16:1–5. Besides, why would the Moabites still need asylum, if their enemy had already departed? They might need food, but not asylum. As for Oswalt and Motyer, both have created a false dichotomy between immediate aid and eschatological justice, making Isaiah offer the latter, to the apparent exclusion of the former. Yet, as Smothers observes, “if 16.4b–5 was spoken by Judah to Moab as a messianic prophecy, it would postpone any help for Moab to the far-distant future.”¹⁰³

The problem, yet again, is that even though these scholars see Isaiah as the speaker, they suppose that the addressee has changed. If, however, not only the speaker but also the addressee remains the same throughout, then vv. 4b–5 must be read as Isaiah making a promise to Jerusalem. Why would Isaiah do such a thing at this moment – if not, as Weis notes, to provide a reason for Jerusalem to welcome the asylum seekers? For Weis, Isaiah’s reasoning is that the invasion of Moab is over, so there is minimal risk in welcoming the refugees. Contra Weis, I suggest that the reason concerns Jerusalem’s own hope regarding its future. I would put Isaiah’s logic this way: “if you welcome these refugees, *then* you will be one step closer to fulfilling God’s ultimate purpose for you, the establishment of a kingdom of righteousness and justice.”

Although “if” is not present in the Hebrew, it does not need to be. Even in English – and far more often in Hebrew – such conditional constructs can be conveyed implicitly: “do X and Y will happen” means “if you do X *then* Y will happen,” even if “if” and “then” are absent.

This interpretation finds support from Roberts, who calls vv. 4b–5 a “a remarkable passage that ties the fulfillment of the promised ideal Davidide to the present merciful treatment of Judah’s Moabite enemies in their hour of disaster and desperate need,” adding that “it is certainly congenial to the theology of the

⁹⁵ Smothers, “Isaiah 15–16,” 82; Watts, *Isaiah 1–33*, 287; Jones, *Howling over Moab*, 261–3; Fitz, “A Significant Other,” 120.

⁹⁶ Goldingay, *Isaiah*, 110–1.

⁹⁷ Goswell, “Isaiah 16,” 98.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 94; Wildberger, *Isaiah*, 143.

⁹⁹ “It is highly unlikely that the fulfillment of a messianic prediction of this kind would be presented as contingent on the conclusion of a critical period in Moab’s history” (Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 1–39*, 300). Likewise, Kaiser writes that vv. 4b–5 “cannot meaningfully be interpreted as a promise to the Moabites” (Kaiser, *Isaiah 13–39*, 71).

¹⁰⁰ Weis, “A Definition of the Genre Massa’ in the Hebrew Bible,” 123.

¹⁰¹ Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah, Chapters 1–39*, 343.

¹⁰² Motyer, *Prophecy of Isaiah*, 152.

¹⁰³ Smothers, “Isaiah 15–16,” 79.

eighth-century Isaiah of Jerusalem.”¹⁰⁴ There is plenty of evidence to confirm Roberts’ last point: that this interpretation of Isaiah 16:1–5 fits the literary context of the book of Isaiah well, with a distinctly “Isaianic” ring to it. Goswell has demonstrated the many similarities between Isaiah 16:4b–5 and Isaiah 9:2–7; 11:1–9; 32, noting especially that all these passages use cognates of “righteousness” (צדק or צדקה) and “justice” (משפט or שפט) to describe an ideal ruler whose chief characteristic is “ensuring the maintenance of social justice.”¹⁰⁵ He observes further similarities between Isaiah 16:1–5 and 32:

A couple of the word-pictures in the Moabite appeal for asylum in 16,2–4a are also found in 32,2 (“Each [ruler] will be [...] like a covert [סתר] from the tempest, [...] like the shade [צל] of a great rock [...]”) [...] This confirms the implied connection in Isaiah 16 between the future ruler’s judicial role (16,5) and his giving consideration to requests for asylum by Moabite refugees (16,3–4a).¹⁰⁶

Finally, Goswell also points out that the command in Isaiah 1:17 to “seek justice” (דרשו משפט) is fulfilled in the messianic ruler of Isaiah 16:5, who will be “one who seeks justice” (משפט דרש).¹⁰⁷ These similarities link Isaiah 16:4b–5 with other material in First Isaiah concerned with the ideal Davidic king.

The distinctive feature of Isaiah 16:4b–5 – the one that makes it unique – connects it even more strongly to the practice of asylum: this is the term “tent of David.” Although this term appears nowhere else in the Old Testament, it is generally agreed that it is a reference to *Jerusalem depicted as a temple of sanctuary*.¹⁰⁸ This is for the following reasons:

1. The Jerusalem temple is often referred to as a tent, especially “in those places where it talks about how those who are oppressed find a hiding place in the temple.”¹⁰⁹
2. “A parallel expression is found in Amos 9,11 (‘the booth [סכה] of David’), which, properly understood, points to the temple and Jerusalem as a unit (=temple mount).”¹¹⁰ These phrases depict the temple as a synecdoche for Jerusalem, while at the same time emphasising Jerusalem’s temple-like nature.
3. Although the phrase “tent of David” does not appear elsewhere, there is a strong connection between David and the tent that he pitched for the Ark of the Covenant.¹¹¹ This means that mention of a tent in connection with David creates a “priestly tone.”¹¹²
4. There are also other priestly resonances in Isaiah 16:5: the word “seek” (דרש) in the phrase “one who seeks justice” is elsewhere rendered “study” in connection to the law (Ezra 7:10); the word “skilful” (מהיר) in the phrase “skilful in righteousness” only appears four times in the Old Testament, and three have to do with the work of a scribe, who was often although not always a priest.¹¹³
5. The tent also recalls the tent “to which Joab fled for asylum (because it housed the altar with horns) (1 Kgs 2,28–34; cf. 1 Kgs 1,50–53).”¹¹⁴
6. Finally, I suggest that calling Jerusalem a “tent” is meant to remind its inhabitants that they were once migrants themselves, with a tent for a temple, and thereby to move them to have compassion on the Moabite migrants who plead with them now. The phrase thus echoes the principle espoused by Deuteronomy 10:19 – “love the stranger, *for you were strangers* in the land of Egypt” (NRSV, italics added).

¹⁰⁴ Roberts, *First Isaiah*, 237.

¹⁰⁵ Goswell, “Isaiah 16,” 99.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 97.

¹⁰⁸ Williamson, *Variations on a Theme*, 61; Lee, “Zion Should Receive the Outcasts of Moab,” 104; Wildberger, *Isaiah*, 144; Goswell, “Isaiah 16,” 101.

¹⁰⁹ Wildberger, *Isaiah*, 144. See Koch’s list of references to the temple as a tent (cited in both Williamson and Goswell): Ps. 27:5; 61:5; cf. Ps 15:1; 78:60; Isa 33:20–21 (Koch, “אֶהֱלֵךְ”, 127).

¹¹⁰ Goswell, “Isaiah 16,” 100.

¹¹¹ “The tent’s association with David is emphasized by the Chronicler by stating twice in 1Chr 15–16 that it was David who had pitched this tent (1Chr 15:1; 16:1)” (Lee, “Zion Should Receive the Outcasts of Moab,” 104).

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Williamson, *Variations on a Theme*, 60–1.

¹¹⁴ Goswell, “Isaiah 16,” 101.

In short, Isaiah 16:4b–5 is not just any messianic prophecy, but one that focuses on the role of the Davidic ruler as one who protects refugees who come to Jerusalem seeking sanctuary.

Goswell is wrong, however, when he claims that in this and in related prophecies “there is no reference to any human agency”¹¹⁵ – as though Jerusalem’s actions have no bearing on the coming of the hoped-for Davidic ruler. Goswell seems to be operating with a theological model in which God’s action takes place *alongside* human action on the same plane, such that a particular action is performed *either* by God *or* by a human being.

As Rolf Rendtorff has shown, however, Isaiah is operating with a theological model in which humans only have agency because they participate in God’s agency – rather like a computer program only runs because the computer gives it the power and CPU space to run. In this model, it would be a mistake to say that what human beings do, God does not do – just like it would be a mistake to say that what Adobe PDF Reader does, the computer does not do.

The synergy between divine and human is visible right from Isaiah 1, in which the prophet enjoins the inhabitants of Jerusalem to “seek justice [משפט], correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow’s cause” (v. 17): almost immediately, however, it is clear that God is the one who “will restore your judges as at the first, and your counsellors as at the beginning. [...] Zion shall be redeemed by justice [משפט], and those in her who repent, by righteousness [יִצְדִּיקָהּ]” (Isa 1:26–27, ESV). This means that, although “the people should now keep and do justice and righteousness,” “God’s help in attaining this goal is the most important element.”¹¹⁶ We can add to this what we have already noted above, namely, that while Isaiah 1:17 is a command to “seek justice” (human agency), Isaiah 16:5 proclaims the coming of a ruler who will “seek justice” (divine agency).

In Isaiah 32 we see a similar dynamic. Verse 1 talks about “the king who will rule in righteousness,” while vv. 15–16 describes the outpouring of the Spirit onto the people of God such that “justice will dwell in the wilderness, and righteousness abide in the fruitful field.” Rendtorff writes: “it might be asked what kind of justice and righteousness is meant here. I think it comes close to that of chap. 1. It is the righteousness which people have to *do*, but God gives them the chance to do it, through the outpouring of his Spirit.”¹¹⁷ An even clearer indication is found in Isaiah 56:1, where the word “righteousness” (יִצְדִּיקָהּ) is used in two different ways in the same verse: once about what humans do, and once about what God will do. The people are “admonished to keep justice and do righteousness,” but “the basic precondition for this admonition is the fact that God’s righteousness and salvation are about to come.”¹¹⁸

This is the backdrop for Gottwald’s powerful synopsis of Isaiah 16:3–5. Speaking about the “prophet’s demand for Judah to receive the Moabite refugees warmly,” Gottwald writes that Isaiah 16:5 is meant as a stark reminder that

it is precisely in such acts of mercy, in the offering of asylum to political refugees, that the Davidic dynasty will show its mettle and will thus outlast all oppressors [...]. Isaiah here evidences the broad compassion of Amos and goes beyond it, for *he urges that even a nation which has committed wrongs and is a traditional enemy must be shown consideration in its time of need*. The willingness to extend such help without prejudice of the past is an important test of a nation’s claim to bear Yahweh’s blessing.¹¹⁹

This points, *contra* Goswell, to the synergistic relationship between divine action and human response, in which Jerusalem’s welcome of Moabite refugees leads to the establishment of its own everlasting kingdom of justice and righteousness. God is doing this in them, and so they are doing themselves. They still have a choice – they can resist God’s will and remain in pride and isolation, self-enclosed (*incurvatus in se*¹²⁰) in a homogeneous cultural enclave that rejects positive interactions with outsiders. But, if they consent to God’s

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 95.

¹¹⁶ Rendtorff, *Canon and Theology*, 186.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 188. Italics original.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 185–6.

¹¹⁹ Gottwald, *All the Kingdoms of the Earth*, 174–5. Italics original.

¹²⁰ See Jenson, *The Gravity of Sin*.

will, they will be taken up into God's wider purposes in establishing God's kingdom on earth: a kingdom that Isaiah repeatedly points out is for all nations (Isa 2:2–5; 14:1–2; 42:1–6; 49:6; 51:4; 60:3). God will bring it about anyway, but Jerusalem and its populace can choose whether they participate in it or not.

Jerusalem is thus invited to participate in God's plan, as an agent in establishing God's kingdom of righteousness and justice on earth. This does not deny the people free will: they can indeed refuse to participate. Nor does it make the coming of the Davidic king contingent upon their actions: God's plans will be accomplished one way or another, by Jerusalem or by someone else. But it does serve as a model for the biblical story more widely, in which God chooses a people through whom to accomplish his purposes in the world.

4 Application, part one: What is the same

If YHWH commanded Judahites in Jerusalem to welcome some refugees from an enemy nation, probably around the eighth century B.C.E., what has that to do with twenty-first century C.E. migration policy, especially for those who are not Jews? How do we build a bridge between the historical particularities of the text and normative guidance about how to live our lives today?

My own approach employs a method described by Paul Ricoeur. Ricoeur characterises the work of the historian as a continual dialectic between sameness and difference, mediated by analogy.¹²¹ We can only understand things in the past by translating them, analogically, into the cultural categories and concepts of today. "History's task," says Ricoeur, "is to specify what has changed, what has been done away with, what was *other*. [But] how can we designate and make discarded institutions and situations understood in contemporary language [...] if not by using functional likenesses which will be corrected later through differentiation?"¹²² In other words, if there were no differences between the situation of the text and our own situation, there would be no need for exegesis – understanding the text would be automatic. But if there were no commonalities between them, there would be no *use* for exegesis, either: as Ricoeur puts it, "if one could not identify or recognize the *same* function in *other* events there would be nothing to understand."¹²³

The practice of exegesis thus presupposes that there are both differences and similarities between the time of the text and our own time. We exegete in order to bring the text's meaning to life for the present day, in a movement Ricoeur calls *appropriation*. This is "not a contingent appendix added on to understanding and explanation, but an organic part of every hermeneutic project."¹²⁴ The full meaning of the text is only actualised when it is appropriated, completing the dialectic from distance back to sameness through analogy. Appropriation means "to 'make one's own' what was previously 'foreign';" for Ricoeur, this is "the ultimate aim of all hermeneutics. Interpretation in its last stage wants to equalize, to render contemporaneous, to assimilate in the sense of making similar. This goal is achieved insofar as interpretation actualizes the meaning of the text for the present reader."¹²⁵

The particularities of Isaiah 15–16 have already been discussed at length. The invasion of Moab occurred at a particular time to a particular people in a particular location, and the command to welcome Moabite refugees was given to a particular people at a particular moment in history. There are no Moabite refugees today, and most people who read Isaiah 15–16 are neither Jewish nor in Jerusalem. Yet the text itself witnesses to its own relevance beyond its historical moment of composition, in two ways. First, as we saw above, it gives no clues as to who attacked Moab or when. Motyer suggests that this is intentional: "The

¹²¹ See Ricoeur, *The Reality of the Historical Past*.

¹²² Ricoeur, *History and Truth*, 27. For more on the "dialectic of the similar and the dissimilar," see Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 100.

¹²³ Ricoeur, *History and Truth*, 24.

¹²⁴ Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 158.

¹²⁵ Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*, 92.

wording throughout is non-specific,” and as such it minimises the importance of historical particulars and directs the reader’s attention on “content not on occasion.”¹²⁶ Second, Isaiah 16:13 shows that the same poem was taken up and reused at another, later point in Israel’s history. This testifies to the ongoing relevance of its message.

We are led by the text itself, therefore, to draw parallels between its situation and our own, finding ways in which we and the text belong to the *same* world, with the *same* underlying metaphysical and ethical principles. Thinking from my explicitly Christian perspective, which places Isaiah 15–16 not only within the book of Isaiah or the Hebrew Bible but as part of the wider Christian canon that includes the New Testament, I suggest the following commonalities:

First, God is the same today as God was then. Whatever the text reveals about God’s unchanging character remains true today.

Second, God still has a chosen people. God’s designation of Israel as a “kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Exod 19:6) is taken up by the New Testament, where it is applied to the church (1 Pet 2:9). Insofar as Christians today see themselves as part of the tradition begun in ancient Israel, they have a holy and priestly calling to represent God’s will and character in every aspect of their lives.

Third, there are still refugees today. Although the definition of a refugee is hotly debated,¹²⁷ the official United Nations definition from the 1951 Refugee Convention states that a refugee is someone who

owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country.¹²⁸

While some prefer to use the modified definition given by the Organisation of African Union Convention of 1969,¹²⁹ both definitions place unnecessary emphasis on the reason for someone having fled their home state, even though this is irrelevant when it comes to their current predicament. As Matthew Gibney notes, “one should no more distribute asylum on the basis of why someone is endangered than one should allocate access to hospital beds according to the how an individual came to be injured.”¹³⁰

Betts and Collier accordingly propose a broader definition of a refugee, using the concept of “*force majeure* – the absence of a reasonable choice but to leave” their place of citizenship.¹³¹ Aleinikoff and Zamore have a similar, but further qualified, definition: “refugees are not simply people forced to flee their homes; they are people who, forced to leave their homes, come into contact with the power of other states.”¹³² An asylum seeker is someone in this situation who has not yet been granted sanctuary by another state.

All (or any) of these definitions provide an accurate description of the Moabites fleeing to Jerusalem, as many translations and exegetical commentaries attest in their use of the modern English word “refugee.”¹³³ The Moabites’ condition puts them in a category of person that has grown immensely in recent decades: there are now more refugees in the world than ever before, and the numbers continue to rise.¹³⁴

¹²⁶ Motyer, *Prophecy of Isaiah*, 148–9.

¹²⁷ See the proposed definitions of a refugee in (*inter alia*): Betts and Collier, *Refuge*, 44–5; Gibney, “The Ethics of Refugees,” 2; Aleinikoff and Zamore, *The Arc of Protection*, 134; Owen, *What Do We Owe to Refugees?*, 35–65; Couldrey and Peebles, “Recognising Refugees.”

¹²⁸ UNHCR, “1951 Refugee Convention,” Article 1.

¹²⁹ The OAU Convention states that a refugee is someone “who, owing to external aggression, occupation, foreign domination or events seriously disturbing public order in either part or the whole of his country of origin or nationality, is compelled to leave his place of habitual residence in order to seek refuge in another place outside his country of origin or nationality” (Organisation of African Unity, “Organization of African Unity Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa”).

¹³⁰ Gibney, “The Ethics of Refugees,” 2.

¹³¹ Betts and Collier, *Refuge*, 44.

¹³² Aleinikoff and Zamore, *The Arc of Protection*, 134.

¹³³ Thus, e.g. the NIV: “Hide the fugitives, do not betray the refugees” (Isa 16:3c). In commentaries, see above, n.2, for a sampling of places the word “refugee” is used.

¹³⁴ See “UNHCR – Global Trends 2019.”

5 Application part two: What is different

But our situation is only analogous, not identical (to borrow Ricoeur's language) to that of ancient Judah. As well as these similarities, there are also significant disjunctions. One difference is that today's world has been divided without remainder into political entities we call "nation states." This is, indeed, one reason that there are more refugees today than ever before. Previously a war or a famine might have made it necessary to move to another location, but very little prevented people from doing so. Now, however, there is nowhere to go – "no open, habitable space to which one can flee" – except into another nation-state, which have borders and the power to prevent refugees from crossing them. Aleinikoff and Zamore conclude from this that "refugees are a 'problem' that the international system of states both creates and must deal with."¹³⁵

This leads to another significant difference. Ancient Judah was a theocracy whose politics was not separate from its religion. But the church is not a nation-state, has no geographically defined territory, no borders, and thus has no power to grant asylum to refugees. Christians today are scattered around the world, citizens of states whose populations are not all Christian. What sort of action, then, can Christians take on behalf of refugees in the modern political situation?

Three answers to this question can be found among Christians. Some argue that it is not the duty of the state to enact Christian principles: the church should mind its own business and not get involved in state affairs. Daniel Strand puts this position clearly:

We should distinguish between government policy and obligations of the church. [...] Yes, the church should be on the frontlines taking care of refugees and displaced peoples, but its [sic] not clear the American government faces a similar obligation to admit refugees because the American government is not a charity organization or the church and we should be glad that it is not.¹³⁶

Proponents of this view draw on Romans 13 to make the case that Christians have a duty to submit to and work within the laws and parameters set by the government.¹³⁷ Thus, for example, James Hoffmeier writes that "governments are ordained by God, and laws and ordinances made by humans, unless they clearly violate divine principles or teaching, should be followed."¹³⁸ In other words, national laws should not be questioned unless they explicitly contradict biblical principles. This position usually, though not necessarily, leads to a political quietism that accepts whatever laws exist as the right ones. Hoffmeier says that he sees "nothing in Scripture that would abrogate current immigration laws."¹³⁹ This view may account in part for the large percentage of American evangelicals who believe that their government has "no responsibility to help refugees."¹⁴⁰ For Christians who hold this view, Isaiah 16:1–5 has no relevance to the question of how many refugees a nation should accept: that is the government's business and the church should not intervene. The best this passage can do is encourage Christians to offer a welcoming community to whichever refugees are accepted.

In direct opposition to this view, some Christians argue for political action, campaigning and lobbying the government to accept more refugees, to support them with language training and housing until they can support themselves, and to allocate funds for aiding refugees outside the nation's borders. Proponents of this view claim that God holds nations to the same standard of justice and mercy as those to which he holds the church: therefore, whatever God commands the church, he also commands all governments. "God's law

¹³⁵ Aleinikoff and Zamore, *The Arc of Protection*, 8.

¹³⁶ Strand, "Throwing Caution to the Wind."

¹³⁷ "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgement" (Romans 13:1–2).

¹³⁸ Hoffmeier, *The Immigration Crisis*, 152.

¹³⁹ Ibid., 146.

¹⁴⁰ James, "A Majority of Evangelicals Feel the U.S. Has No Responsibility to Help Refugees;" see also Hartig, "GOP Views of Accepting Refugees to US Turn More Negative as Admissions Plummet."

are not an arbitrary set of rules for one nation,” contend Mark and Luke Glanville; rather, “the law reflects the will and wisdom of [...] the God of every place and every nation.”¹⁴¹ “Each nation stands judged by God in Christ,” agrees Robert Heimburger,¹⁴² who goes on to provide biblical evidence (Ps 82 *inter alia*) that God judged not only Israel and Judah but all nations who failed to protect the weak and vulnerable: “it would not make sense for Yhwh to set aside Yhwh’s unique ways when judging nations other than Israel for their injustice. It appears that not only justice for the vulnerable but also justice and love for migrants remain requirements for every nation. If a nation is to continue possessing its land, it cannot practice injustice toward migrants.”¹⁴³

Other Christians go still further, with a third option that is compatible with the second but not with the first. This option involves engaging in civil disobedience in the face of government regulations deemed to be unjust and contrary to God’s will. The most famous example of this is the 1980s Sanctuary Movement in the United States, in which church congregations protected asylum seekers from deportation when the government refused to grant them refugee status.¹⁴⁴ This view is defended theologically by appeal to places in the New Testament where Jesus or the apostles disobeyed Roman or Jewish laws (Matt 12:1–14; Acts 5:29 *inter alia*), as well as by appeal to Christian tradition. “Christians over the centuries,” write the Glanvilles, “have repeatedly insisted that Romans 13 should not be understood as ruling out the possibility of challenging unjust laws and *even disobeying them* in certain circumstances.”¹⁴⁵

It is beyond the scope of this article to argue in favour of one of these positions, all of which are held and practised by many Christians and defended by many theologians. I only note that the relevance of Isaiah 16:1–5 is severely limited for Christians who see no political dimension to their faith. The main purpose of this article, however, has been to point to a neglected Bible passage that should be taken into consideration when developing a Christian ethic of refugees. Whatever our political theology may be, Isaiah’s call to welcome the Moabites can be used to guide our attitude towards those who have been forced to flee their homeland and have arrived at our doorstep.

That attitude is one of *welcome, protection, provision, and sanctuary*. It is an attitude that commends us to open wide our arms to refugees and to do whatever we can to help them in their situation of homelessness, statelessness, and persecution. Today’s world is one in which more refugees than ever before are in need of aid. In this situation, the same God who moved Isaiah now calls his people again: “Give counsel! Judge favourably! Make your shadow like the night in noonday! Shelter the forced migrants! Do not expose the refugees!”¹⁴⁶

Why? Not because they are innocent (though most of them are). Not because they come from nations who are friends with ours, or with whom we have no history of conflict. Not out of some Kantian deontological imperative that gives no reason other than that we “ought to.” Rather, if we follow the message of the prophet, we welcome refugees because doing so is part of how we become the people God created us to be. Our welcome brings us one step closer to the establishment of a kingdom and a throne on which will sit a ruler of the line of David. This ruler will reign in loving kindness, faithfulness, justice, and righteousness, and he will put an end to all oppression and destruction. We are invited, by showing steadfast love in our welcome of refugees, to participate in the establishment of this throne.

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¹⁴¹ Glanville and Glanville, *Refuge Reimagined*, 127.

¹⁴² Heimburger, *God and the Illegal Alien*, 95.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 121.

¹⁴⁴ See Rabben, *Sanctuary and Asylum*; Heimburger, *God and the Illegal Alien*, 120.

¹⁴⁵ Glanville and Glanville, *Refuge Reimagined*, 144–5. Italics added.

¹⁴⁶ Isaiah 16:3, my translation.

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