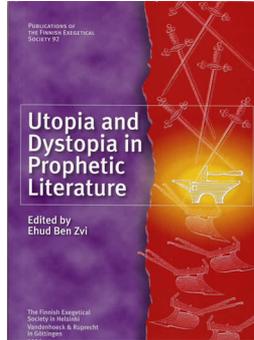


○ **REVIEW OF EHUD BEN ZVI (ED.), *UTOPIA AND DYSTOPIA IN PROPHETIC LITERATURE***  
 (HELSINKI: FINNISH EXEGETICAL SOCIETY; GÖTTINGEN: VANDENHOECK & RUPRECHT, 2006)

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As Kathleen O'Connor notes at the beginning of her essay, the use of the terms utopia and dystopia to interpret the Bible is an anachronism. The term 'utopia' did not exist until Thomas More wrote his fascinating book, *Utopia*, in 1516. Nor indeed did the genre of utopian literature that More invented almost single-handedly. Yet, in distinction from a literary genre there is also a utopian impulse – the desire for a better alternative reality – that runs more deeply and of which More's book then becomes a prime expression. It is this impulse that the writers of the essays in this collection explore in their various ways in the prophetic books of the Hebrew Bible.

This volume seeks to address the play between utopia and dystopia in relation to prophetic literature. It has contributions by Steven Schweitzer on utopian theory and then on second Zechariah, Jack Sasson on the Mari prophetic texts, Matthew Neujahr on Akkadian prophecies, Ehud Ben Zvi on the social roles of utopian visions in the prophetic texts, Kathleen O'Connor on the utopian/dystopian tension within Jeremiah's two visions of the future, James Crenshaw on Jeremiah 17:5-11, Hanna Liss on the fictional temple vision of Ezekiel that creates its own utopia, Julia O'Brien on the rather less-than-utopian representations of gender in the Book of the Twelve, Philip Davies on tensions over the positive and negative representations of the wilderness years, Marvin Sweeney on Amos 9:1-11, Daniel Smith-Christopher on trying to recover the valid political nature of the famous 'swords into ploughshares' texts, Mark Boda on ancient temple building and restorations and Michael Floyd's challenge to the prophetic disappointment motif as the basis for utopian prophecies. Rather than offering an abstract of each article, I prefer to pick up a few key issues and raise a few questions.

The collection is, to begin with, very light on theory and heavy on historicist and exegetical detail. The exception here is Steven Schweitzer, whose doctoral thesis, 'Reading Utopia in Chronicles' (University of Notre Dame, 2005), seems to be one of the driving forces behind the topic of the volume. His short opening essay raises many of the theoretical issues regarding utopia.

Other than that, a few rely on Schweitzer, such as Ben Zvi and O'Connor, occasionally going further into the increasing amount of critical material relating to utopia. In other cases, the theme of utopia or dystopia is light indeed. So we find that utopia is taken as an unrealistic fantasy (Crenshaw), or mentioned in a title and once in a conclusion (Sweeney), or is equated with blessing over against curse (Boda), or put forward as a better term than eschatology (Floyd). Needless to say, I was looking for more of the interaction between biblical studies and utopian literary criticism. For example, Mark Boda's long and at times flatly methodical comparison between the ancient Near Eastern accounts of temple building and those of Haggai and Zechariah cries out for engagement with Ernst Bloch's point that building itself is a utopian act. Let alone building a temple, which Bloch himself traces through from the mythology of Solomon's temple to the masons and their collective knowledge. At least with Schweitzer's theoretical essay ('Utopia and Utopian Literary Theory: Some Preliminary Observations'), I could engage and disagree. So, while he cites and discusses work by Louis Marin and Darko Suvin (and, indeed, my work), he unaccountably leaves out the founder of modern utopian studies, Ernst Bloch. In doing so, he badly misrepresents the relation between Marxism and utopian thought, characterising the two as opposed to each other (a check in with Bloch, Fredric Jameson and Tom Moylan would correct that mistake).

Other than that the collection is very historicist, obsessing with dates and locations and periods and initial readers. Now, this is what one might expect from papers that originally were part of the Prophetic Texts and Their Ancient Contexts Section of the Society of Biblical Literature. Ancient context it certainly is, including a welcome dose of ancient Near Eastern context, but understood in a very traditional sense within biblical studies. Something a little more creative with such an interesting topic would not have gone astray. The collection is also extremely devoted to detailed engagement with the biblical texts in question – the prophetic corpus. Nothing replaces some decent exegesis, although in some cases I got the sense that the writers were all too relieved to pass over the tricky terrain of what utopia and dystopia might actually look like and bury themselves in what they have always done.

The most interesting pieces were those that in one way or another played with the tension of utopia and dystopia. Why are these terms, their visions, plans and hopes so closely entwined with each other? On this level, the essays by O'Connor (Jeremiah), Davies (wilderness), Smith-Christopher (Micah) and Schweitzer (Second-Zechariah) are the more interesting. In their own ways, they explore the ways utopia and dystopia feed on one another. Or, as Philip Davies puts it, utopia is 'usually characterized by universal fertility and dystopia by universal barrenness' (160). The two are never far away from each other. All sorts of questions arise from this interaction. Is utopia a response to a bad present (dystopia)? Or is dystopia a cynical critique of utopian hopes? Or do utopias turn out to be dystopian all too readily? These are the inconsistencies and contradictions that not merely plague utopias and utopian texts, but are in fact part of their definition.

However, there is a deeper current of utopia present in this work, one that its writers produce unknowingly. It begins with Ben Zvi's almost whimsical musings on the very small circle of 'literati' (i.e. scribes) in a small ancient population who read and reflected and wrote in response to each others' works. It continues in Philip Davies evocation of the small subclass of readers and writers who were responsible for the texts that we have, and who replied to each other on themes such as the utopian/dystopian wilderness. It turns up again in Smith-Christopher's iden-

tification as a Quaker by birth and conviction – a smallish religious group if ever there was one. And it shows up in the fascinating suggestion by Liss that Ezekiel’s temple is a ‘no-place’ with its own reality. The text, if you like, becomes its own utopian space, especially since Ezekiel’s temple was probably never a serious temple plan. Now, the obvious point to make is that the first three operate at a self-referential level, expressing the visions that these writers have of that small group of scholars who work on the Bible. But if we pick up Liss’s point and add to it that a prime utopian function of literature and a movement is its collective gesture – the creation and sustenance of a group – then in their musings we find a utopian picture in and of itself. This small group of readers, writers, arguers and debaters is unwittingly their own utopian vision.

Finally, given the title of this work, I did hope for some more interaction between biblical studies and literary theory. All of the essays – some more and some less successfully – bring the question of utopia to bear on the biblical and ancient Near Eastern texts. I looked in vain for some engagement with the question: what are the implications for utopian literature and theory? What might biblical studies contribute to those debates? How indeed might utopian theory need to be reassessed in light of these essays? Some had a more explicit focus on present issues, such as gender (O’Brien), or politics (Smith-Christopher), or theology (O’Connor), but no-one dared to ask what might happen to utopian literature itself with the recognition that the tensions between utopia and dystopia run through the prophetic literature of the Bible.