



Isaiah's Prophetic Instruction and the Disciples in Isaiah 8:16

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Abstract

Isa 8:16 is considered a key reference regarding the formation of the book of Isaiah and the role of prophetic disciples in this process. This article argues, however, that originally this verse had a more limited significance. The instruction to which v. 16 refers is to be identified with vv. 12-15 rather than an early 'book' of Isaiah. The expression 'the instructed ones' (of YHWH rather than the prophet) is applied to the prophet's audience. This term reflects Isaiah's characteristic view of prophesying as an act of instruction and prophecy as a form of teaching, and it does not presuppose the existence of any prophetic school. The view that sealing the instruction would allude to preserving prophetic teaching for the posterity is discounted here in favour of understanding the symbolic act as a metaphor from the legal sphere referring to authentication, with no inherent temporal significance.

Keywords

Isaiah 8:16, disciples, prophetic schools, Isaiah's Denkschrift, composition of prophetic books, תורה

"Bind up the testimony, seal the instruction among my disciples!" This verse from Isa 8:16 is of central importance in discussions regarding the composition of the book of Isaiah. In general, the Latter Prophets provide relatively little information concerning the process of recording divine utterances in writing, and they devote even less attention to the role of supportive groups in this process. Since Isa 8:16 mentions both aspects in one place apparently as somehow correlated, the exceptional position of this verse in studies dealing with the formation of the book of Isaiah hardly needs any lengthy justification. But who are actually the persons identified by the prophecy as 'my disciples' (לְתַלְמֵדָי) and in what form are they connected with the prophet Isaiah and his teaching? It is this problem of the identity of Isa 8:16's 'disciples' and the nature of their

relationship with the prophet's 'instructions' that the present study would like to address more closely.

1. Isa 8:16 in Its Context

Isa 8:16 is part of Isa 6:1-9:6, a pericope labelled since K. Budde's famous study as Isaiah's *Denkschrift* or memoir.¹ While various aspects of Budde's *Denkschrift*-hypothesis have been subject to criticism,² he has left a considerable imprint on subsequent Isaiah-research. The idea that chapters 6-8, or 6+8, or 7-8 form a distinctive literary unit and an ancient core of the book of Isaiah still enjoys considerable support.³ The basic layer of this collection of prophecies is generally presupposed to go back to 733-732 BC. During these years, Northern Israel and Aram established a political front against the increasing influence of the Assyrian Empire in the West, and they tried to convince Judah by force to join their rebellion. According to Isa 7, in relation to this threat, the prophet Isaiah uttered several encouraging prophecies of salvation for Ahaz and the royal house of Judah.

Chapter 8, which in contrast to 7 is formulated as a first-person account of the prophet, contains several logical shifts on which scholars commonly agree. (1) Vv. 1-4 describe a symbolic act of Isaiah predicting the fall of Samaria and Damascus. Implicitly, these verses proclaim salvation for Jerusalem. (2) Vv. 5-8 change the message drastically: YHWH was disappointed by the reluctance of "this people" (the name of the disobedient leaders of Jerusalem) who "rejected the waters of Shiloah flowing gently and softly", i.e. the former words of encouragement (8:1-4; cf. **דנמ** in Isa 5:24; 30:12), over against the enticing political support offered by the Assyrians. By way of a similar imagery, the prophet predicts that Judah will be overwhelmed by "the mighty and great waters of the River (Euphrates)". This prediction, which is a prophecy of judgment against Jerusalem, apparently presupposes the historical background drawn in 2 Kgs 16:7-10. (3) Vv. 9-10 is another salvation prophecy predicting the destruction of

¹ K. Budde, *Jesajas Erleben. Eine gemeinverständliche Auslegung der Denkschrift des Propheten* (Kap. 6, 1-9, 6) (Gotha, 1928).

² See, e.g., H. G. Reventlow, "Das Ende der sog. 'Denkschrift' Jesajas", *BN* 38/39 (1987), pp. 62-67; S. A. Irvine, "The Isaianic *Denkschrift*: Reconsidering an Old Hypothesis", *ZAW* 104 (1992), pp. 216-231.

³ For the impact of Budde's thesis, see J. Barthel, *Prophetenwort und Geschichte* (FAT 19; Tübingen, 1997), pp. 37-65; T. Wagner, *Gottes Herrschaft. Eine Analyse der Denkschrift* (Jes 6, 1-9, 6) (VTSup 108; Leiden, 2006), pp. 18-39; U. Becker, *Jesaja—von der Botschaft zum Buch* (FRLANT 178; Göttingen, 1997), p. 22.

the enemies of Judah. These verses diminish the critical tone of vv. 5-8 and appear to presuppose vv. 11-15. For these reasons, they are often considered to be later insertions into their present location. (4) V. 11 may have followed v. 8 originally. It is also clear that v. 23 marks another significant shift in the text. However, vv. 11-22 are generally further divided into several smaller subunits. It is believed that Isa 8 comes to a close with the divine speech of vv. 11-15. Whether the memoir or its various parts such as vv. 16-18 are ascribed to Isaiah himself or they are taken to be literary constructs from a later period,⁴ one is accustomed to regard Isa 8:16-18 as a coherent,⁵ conclusive redactional text, a postscript, written explicitly in view of the *Denkschrift* as a literary composition.⁶ The prophet has ended his prophetic career and is now withdrawing himself from public life. Isa 8:19-22 is regarded as a late fragmentary (vv. 19-20.21-22) redactional addition preparing and already presupposing 8:23-9:6.

The consequences of this contextualisation are significant for the questions posed in the introductory section of this article. It is this specific view of vv. 16-18 as a colophon the reason why many exegetes believe that תְּעִידָהּ and תִּזְכֹּרָהּ comprise all of Isaiah's words uttered in connection with the Syro-Ephraimite threat, that the scope of writing and the act of sealing is an attempt to preserve Isaiah's book for the posterity, and that in this process, the group of disciples are guardians of prophetic traditions, paradigmatic examples of how the book of Isaiah has developed from short utterances into a composite book envisaging later generations.

Nevertheless, however widely established, I think that we have good reasons to question that Isa 8:16-18 is a postscript and a paradigm for the literary formation of the book of Isaiah. First, in analysing the redaction-critical role of Isa 8:16, one often neglects to take full account of the fact that Isa 8:16, pointing to the preservation of the prophetic message, is not a unique text in this book. Two other passages, Isa 8:1 and 30:8, also refer to recording prophetic messages. Given that allusions to writing are relatively rare in prophetic books (cf. Jer 36;

⁴ For the latter, see O. Kaiser, *Der Prophet Jesaja. Kapitel 1-12* (ATD 17; Berlin, ⁵1981), pp. 189-192; Becker, *Jesaja*, p. 23; M. J. de Jong, *Isaiah among the Ancient Near Eastern Prophets* (VTSup 117; Leiden, 2007), p. 56.

⁵ The coherence of vv. 16-18 is occasionally disputed. See Barthel, *Prophetenwort*, pp. 232-233, and Wagner, *Herrschaft*, pp. 80-81, 255, 281-283, both of whom question the originality of v. 18.

⁶ Kaiser, *Jesaja*, p. 189; H. Wildberger, *Jesaja I* (BKAT 10/1; Neukirchen-Vluyn, 1972), p. 343; H. Barth, *Jesaja-Worte der Josiazeit* (WMANT 48; Neukirchen-Vluyn, 1977), pp. 152-156; R. E. Clements, *Isaiah 1-39* (Grand Rapids, MI, 1980), p. 101; Becker, *Jesaja*, p. 21; Barthel, *Prophetenwort*, pp. 59-60, 229-230; W. A. M. Beuken, *Jesaja 1-12* (HThKAT; Freiburg, 2003), pp. 215, 230; Wagner, *Herrschaft*, pp. 80-81, 283.

51:60; Hab 2:2), and because the three Isaianic examples appear in a thematically closely related context, they deserve greater attention than they have been accorded in the past.⁷

Isa 8:1 mentions the recording of a short text with an ominous message: a prediction of judgment for the enemies of Judah, an implicit salvation oracle for the people of Jerusalem. Here, too, the act of writing derives from an explicit command. Moreover, עֲדִים, a derivative of the verb עוּד, plays in 8:2 a prominent role (cf. תְּעוּדָה in 8:16). In a different situation, Isa 30:8 refers again to recording a prophecy. Although the precise content of this tablet is unclear, the text is globally characterised as תּוֹרַת יְהוָה,⁸ having the function 'to testify' (read לְעֵד instead of לְעֵד). The terminological proximity of these three texts is undeniable. However, in neither Isa 8:1 nor 30:8 does the act of writing imply the end of a prophetic career. In both instances, the recording of the prophetic messages has a more limited significance, related to one particular occasion. Should the closely related Isa 8:16 be a different case?

Second, the pericopes before and after vv. 16-18 make a clear distinction between the people of Jerusalem in general and those adhering to God and his prophet. The fact that this restricted audience appears only here in Isa 1-39 is a strong argument in favour of taking vv. 11-22 as a coherent section.⁹ Vv. 19-22 can be read as a direct continuation of vv. 16-18 without difficulty, and they present no real logical break in the text which would urge us to consider these verses later additions.¹⁰ In this larger pericope of Isa 8:11-22, v. 16 (with vv. 17-18) occupies a central position. Therefore, isolating Isa 8:16-18 as a closure text supposed to detail the process of redaction of a(n early) book of Isaiah is, indeed, problematic.

2. The Problem of 'my disciples' in Isa 8:16

I shall now turn to address the main question, to whom the 'disciples' of this verse could refer, focusing in the first instance on the possessive suffix of בְּלִמְדֵי. It is striking that some ancient versions do not bring Isa 8:16 in connection with

⁷ Cf. H. G. M. Williamson, *The Book Called Isaiah* (Oxford, 1994), pp. 95-106.

⁸ Cf. Isa 30:9. This is the most likely reference of the feminine suffix of כְּתִיבָה in v. 8.

⁹ The correlation is also underlined by the return of the terms תּוֹרַת and תְּעוּדָה in v. 20.

¹⁰ The fact that vv. 19-22 connect well with v. 18 is generally recognised (cf. Barth, *Jesaja-Worte*, p. 155). Concrete reasons as to why then these should still be considered later addition are rarely given. Apparently this is presupposed due to the fact that vv. 16-18 are *a priori* regarded as a closing section.

disciples. The LXX diverges substantially both in the delimitation of the vv. 15 and 16 and the interpretation of the prophecy itself. The word *יצור*¹¹ is attached to the previous v. 15. The rest of v. 16 is translated as: “then those who seal the law so as not to study (it) (τοὺ μὴ μαθεῖν) will be revealed”. The LXX considered v. 16 as part of the earlier pronouncement of judgment. The Targum, while paraphrasing, reflects a text which comes closer to the structure of the MT: “Prophet, guard the testimony, do not testify among them, for they do not attend. Seal and hide the law, for they do not wish to learn from it.”¹² In place of ‘among my disciples’ the Peshitta renders ‘in/with my teaching’ (*by’wlpny*), but it basically confirms the consonantal text of MT (*בלמד*), as also do the Vulgate (*in discipulis meis*) and Aquila (ἐν διδασκατοῖς μου). In spite of the differences, all versions presuppose the root *למד*, and we have no serious reasons to doubt the form in the MT.

From an exegetical point of view it is a far more significant problem to identify the reference of the possessive suffix in *בְּלִמְדֵי*. Whose disciples does the text allude to? The majority of modern exegetes opts for the view that this verse deals with Isaiah’s disciples.¹³ Being mentioned here in connection with prophetic ‘teaching’, one is accustomed to assign this group a significant role in the process of formation of the book Isaiah. Mowinckel has published several studies on this topic in which he pleads for the existence of an Isaianic school, a group similar to the *בְּנֵי הַנְּבִיאִים* in Elisha’s time, whose influence on the book of Isaiah can be traced down to beyond the Babylonian exile.¹⁴ In recent Isaiah scholarship, one is more cautious in taking Isa 8:16 to denote an actual prophetic school. And while no clear definitions are given as to whom this verse would refer, the very fact that such group of Isaianic ‘disciples’ existed is generally accepted.¹⁵ There are only a few who voiced their doubts concerning this

¹¹ In the LXX, *יצור* is read as *צור*, ‘rock, cliff’, and understood figuratively as ‘security’; cf. ἐν ἀσφαλείᾳ ὄντες.

¹² The negative interpretation common to both versions does not presuppose a different Hebrew text (e.g., *בלמדו*, with *מן* *privativum*, ‘so as not to learn’). Both versions endeavour to make sense of *למד* in connection with the act of sealing the teaching which they interpret as a way of concealing the document from reading.

¹³ Cf. Williamson, *Book*, pp. 99-102; J. Dekker, “Bind Up the Testimony: Isaiah 8:16 and the making of the Hebrew Bible”, in R. de Hoop et al. (eds), *The Impact of Unit Delimitation on Exegesis* (Pericope 7; Leiden, 2009), pp. 67-68.

¹⁴ S. Mowinckel, *Jesajadisiplene* (Oslo, 1926); Idem, *The Spirit and the Word* (Minneapolis, MN, 2002), pp. 54-62. Similarly also Ch. D. Isbell, “The *Limmūdīm* in the Book of Isaiah”, *JSOT* 34 (2009), p. 100.

¹⁵ Cf. Wildberger, *Jesaja*, p. 346; Williamson, *Book*, pp. 6-8; Dekker, “Bind Up”, pp. 75-76.

interpretation of the Hebrew text of Isa 8:16, suggesting that YHWH rather than the prophet is alluded to by the suffix of 'my disciples'.¹⁶

The reference of the possessive suffix of בְּלִמְדָי depends on the identity of the speaker in v. 16. It is clear that v. 17 is the prophet's voice and vv. 12-15 is divine speech. Some ancient interpreters mark v. 15 as the closure of the divine utterance and connect v. 16 to the prophet's words in vv. 17-18. Whether this delimitation signifies awareness for the change of speakers¹⁷ or merely for the addressees, remains doubtful. Nevertheless, other ancient traditions (LXX, Targum) consider v. 16 part of the utterance of YHWH, vv. 12-15. Are there compelling philological or syntactical arguments that could bring this debate any closer to a solution?

The idea that v. 16 would be the prophet's word is actually based on one important observation. The prophet's word in the following v. 17 begins with a ו, וְחָכְמִי, 'and I shall wait', a weqatal form. This connective ו may give the impression of continuity which means that what has been told previously must derive from the same speaker, i.e. the prophet. Otherwise וְחָכְמִי would sound strange as the beginning of a new paragraph.¹⁸ Nevertheless, since vv. 17-18 form a contemplative prophetic monologue, in order to interpret v. 16 in relation to this monologue and to make the transition between v. 16 and v. 17 smoother one additional textual change is necessary: the two imperatives, צוֹר and חָתַם, are often changed into infinitive absolutes (צוֹר / חָתַם), reading "I will bind up . . . I will seal . . . I shall wait".

To be sure, changing the imperatives into infinitive absolutes does not automatically solve the problem. The syntactical function of the infinitive absolute is often that of an imperative, especially when it is used in an initial position as in this sentence.¹⁹ Nevertheless, several critical arguments make this textual alteration unlikely. (1) In the first place we should note the straightforward fact that the imperative is firmly rooted in the tradition.²⁰ (2) Second, when it comes to grammatical matters, the problem gets further complicated. For while it is correct to say that the infinitive absolute can also be used as a yiqtol

¹⁶ J. Boehmer, "Jahwes Lehrlinge" im Buch Jesaja", *ARW* 33 (1936), pp. 171-75.

¹⁷ So Dekker, "Bind Up", p. 68, on 1QIsa^a, Codex Leningradiensis, Codex Alpensis, and Ms 7a1 of the Peshitta.

¹⁸ Wildberger, *Jesaja*, pp. 342-43; Beuken, *Jesaja*, p. 214; Dekker, "Bind Up", pp. 67-68. The problematic relationship between vv. 16 and 17 was also felt by the Aramaic and Greek translators who inserted extra words in order to clarify the speakers of the conversation. Interestingly, their solution is again similar (cf. אָמַר / λέγω).

¹⁹ Cf. P. Joüon and T. Muraoka, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew* (Roma, 1993), §123u-v.

²⁰ Beyond the MT, see also cf. Aquila, Symmachos, Theodotion, Vulgate, Targum.

with an indicative sense ('I will bind up'), that can only be the case where the infinitive absolute elaborates on a yiqtol form *used previously*. In such cases the infinitive has the same subject as the foregoing finite verbal form and inherits its temporal significance.²¹ For Isa 8:16 this means that if we presuppose that the two verbs are infinitive absolutes with a predicative function, their subject should be deduced from the previous (and not the following) verses. The actor behind the verbs (and thus also behind the suffix of **יְבַלְבְּלֵנִי**) would be again none else but YHWH, the speaker in vv. 12-15. (3) Third, the interpretation of v. 16 as the prophet's own decision is also problematic from a contextual point of view. Binding up the testimony and sealing the teaching is a highly significant development in the interaction between God and the prophet. If this indeed refers to providing no further revelation, I seriously wonder whether such a step could have been taken on the prophet's own initiative, as the proposed interpretation of v. 16 would imply. It is YHWH alone who tells him when to start and he alone determines the length of his activity (cf. also Isa 8:1; 30:8). (4) Finally, there are formal arguments in favour of connecting v. 16 with the previous divine utterance. In the present pericope, divine speech is poetry (vv. 12-15), the prophet's word is prose (vv. 11, 17-18). Formally speaking, v. 16 belongs to the former and should thus be seen as part of the utterance of YHWH, 8:12-15.²² Consequently, it is more plausible that the possessive suffix of **יְבַלְבְּלֵנִי** in v. 16 refers to YHWH and not the prophet.²³

²¹ Joüon and Muraoka, *Grammar*, §123w. Examples noted in this section are actually similar to those in §123x, in which the inf. abs. is the equivalent of a preceding finite verbal form. E.g., **אָבַל וְהוֹתֵר** in 2 Kgs 4:43 takes the semantic nuance of **וַיֵּאבְלוּ** from the previous verse, both having the same subject. In Isa 5:5, **הָסֵר** and **פָּרַץ** have the same temporal significance and subject as the previous **אֲנִי עֹשֶׂה**, 'I will do'.

²² This is an oracle with two addressees: those faithful to God in vv. 12-15 and the prophet alone in v. 16.

²³ Regarding the shift to v. 17, **וַיַּחְכְּמֵנִי**, 'and I shall wait', it is important to note that chapter 8 has the form of an autobiographic report (cf. vv. 1, 3, 5, 11, 17, 18). The prophet retells his personal experience and reaction to the divine word without giving all the details that would make the text more fluent. It would have sounded better to mirror the command of God in v. 16 by "and I went and sealed the instruction . . ." Instead, v. 17 records a following step that the prophet makes. Similar is the case in Isa 8:1-4, where it is difficult to correlate God's command in v. 1 and the prophet's action in v. 3, despite the fact that the wayyiqtol (**וַיִּאָקְרָב**) would plead for such a correlation.

3. The Identity of the Disciples in Isa 8:16

If it was not Isaiah's school that v. 16 has in view, who were these disciples? In what sense did this group differ from the rest of the people? I shall attempt to answer these questions from two perspectives. First, the term לְמִדָּה needs to be analysed more closely, especially in relation with תְּעוּדָה and תּוֹרָה. Second, one could obtain more information regarding these 'disciples' by looking at the actual content of the instruction brought in connection with them.

3.1. תּוֹרָה, תְּעוּדָה, and לְמִדָּה

Scholars often take תְּעוּדָה and תּוֹרָה to refer to the Isaiah-memoir, Isa 6:1-8:15, or an early collection of Isaianic prophecies.²⁴ However, this hypothesis derives from the alleged postscript-character of vv. 16-18 discussed above. While expressing strong reservations in this respect, Williamson puts forward several alternative suggestions: "This document [תְּעוּדָה and תּוֹרָה] might have contained no more than the names of Isaiah's children (8:18), or it might have contained as much as a full summary of all Isaiah's teaching to date, rather as in the case of Jeremiah's scroll (cf. Jer 36:2, 4, 28). We shall never know."²⁵

This statement may serve well to illustrate the uncertainty around this issue, but Williamson's final note of scepticism can hardly mean the end of our exegetical investigation. Some references in the text do help us identify the 'teaching' with relative certainty.

I do not intend to question the suggestion that in the present *final* form of the text 'testimony' and 'teaching' could be taken as an allusion to 8:1-15, to 6:1-8:15, or even in a much wider sense, to the previous Isaianic teaching in general. Nevertheless, it should not be excluded that the two terms, תְּעוּדָה and תּוֹרָה, had an earlier, more restricted connotation as well. Note that in the two already mentioned cases of Isa 8:1 and 30:8, the book has a document with a limited content in view, actually a single prophecy, which is closely related to one particular moment of the prophet's activity. Moreover, the Hebrew terms תְּעוּדָה and תּוֹרָה can be taken not only in the general sense as referring to any written document (such as the Torah of Moses with all its different genres), but also literally. Indeed, this ought to be the obvious starting point before making a case for the less literal interpretation of these terms.

²⁴ Cf., e.g., Barthel, *Prophetenwort*, p. 61: "eine umfangreichere Niederschrift prophetischer Verkündigung".

²⁵ Williamson, *Book*, p. 103.

But what is the primary meaning of תְּעוּדָה and תּוֹרָה? Outside Isa 8:16 and 20, תְּעוּדָה appears only once more in Ruth 4:7, in the legal context of acquiring agricultural fields and in relation to a public marriage ceremony: “a man drew off his shoe, and gave it to his neighbour; and this was the attestation (תְּעוּדָה) in Israel.” In Ruth 4, the term ‘attestation’ does not seem to refer to a written document in the first instance, as it clearly is the case in the book of Isaiah. It is possible, as often argued, that תְּעוּדָה is semantically also related to the more common עֵדוּת.²⁶ Both terms derive from the verb עוּד, which generally means ‘to testify, witness’, but sometimes also having a nuance of ‘to warn’.²⁷ It is here particularly important that עוּד is also used to describe the activity of the prophets, which is probably to be explained by the fact that prophetic speech often has the form of a lawsuit.²⁸ On some occasions, עוּד is connected with the תּוֹרָה (Deut 32:46; Neh 9:34) reminding again of Isa 8:16, where תְּעוּדָה is used as a synonym of תּוֹרָה.²⁹

With respect to the second term, תּוֹרָה appears in Isa 1-39 in a few cases, referring specifically to the prophetic pronouncement. In Isa 1:10 and 2:3, תּוֹרָה stands in parallelism with דְּבַר־יְהוָה, in 5:24 with אִמְרַת קְדוֹשׁ־יִשְׂרָאֵל. In 30:9, the context suggests that תּוֹרָה refers to the prophetic instruction. יָרָה, ‘to teach, to instruct’, the verb from which תּוֹרָה derives, also appears in connection with prophetic activity in Isaiah.³⁰

This highlights a central aspect of the book of Isaiah which has been unduly neglected in discussions of Isa 8:16. In this book, the prophetic message is *basically* characterised as an instruction addressed to the people. In comparison to other prophetic books, Isaiah accords a maximum attention to prophecy as teaching so that verbs and nouns related to this semantic field are virtually ubiquitous.³¹

What is the divine instruction and warning alluded to in Isa 8:16? Remarkably, the possibility of identifying this teaching with the immediately preceding

²⁶ As an analogy, cf. לָמַד (Isa 8:16) and תִּלְמִיד (1 Chr 25:8), having a similar semantic coverage.

²⁷ Cf. Ex 19:21.23; 21:29; Deut 8:19; 1 Sam 8:9; 1 Kgs 2:42; Neh 13:15. A similar ambiguity can also be observed in another legal term, יָכַח, also used as a synonym of עוּד (see Ps 50:7-8; cf. also Gen 31:37 with Mal 2:14), and in connection with prophets (Isa 1:18; 29:21; Ezek 3:26; Am 5:10; Mic 6:2).

²⁸ Cf. 2 Kgs 17:13.15; 2 Chr 24:19; Neh 9:26.29.30.34; Am 3:13; Jer 6:10; 11:7; 42:19. A possible relationship between prophetic עוּד / תְּעוּדָה and Aramaic ‘*dd*’ referring to a prophet on the Zakkur-stele cannot be excluded.

²⁹ Cf. Williamson, *Book*, pp. 99, 101.

³⁰ Cf. Isa 2:3; 28:9(.26) (יָרָה). In Isa 9:14, the false prophet is called a מוֹרֵה־שֶׁקֶר, “teacher of falsehood”.

³¹ See Isa 1:3.17; 5:13.21; 7:15; 8:4; 10:13; 11:2.9; 19:11.12.21; 31:2 (cf. 26:9.10.16; 27:11; 29:24; 32:4; 33:6).

command is generally bypassed in recent exegesis. Some older commentaries, however, mention this possibility, although without much explanation.³² Nonetheless, the impression that the divine utterance of vv. 12-15 can be the תּוֹרָה to which v. 16 refers is underlined not merely by the physical proximity of vv. 16 and 12-15, but by two more significant arguments as well. First of all, vv. 12-15, offering concrete prohibitions and admonitions, obviously corresponds to the genre of תּוֹרָה and תּוֹעוּדָה. Additionally, the fact that vv. 12-15 form the divine instruction mentioned in v. 16 is also evidenced by the detailed introduction of this divine pronouncement, v. 11: “For thus spoke YHWH to me when he encouraged me (or: as if he would have taken me by hand), and instructed me not to walk in the way of this people”. Encouraging one to do it the right way (or: taking someone by hand)—as I think it is correct to translate the expression כְּחֶזְקַת הַיָּד³³—is an expressively pedagogical act. The same pedagogical nuance appears in the verb יָסַר meaning ‘to discipline, chasten, punish’ in a physical sense, but also with the nuance of ‘to instruct, admonish’ doing it the right way.³⁴ This word is also part of the semantic field of teaching to which תּוֹרָה also belongs.³⁵ Needless to mention, the expression הַלֵּךְ בְּדַרְךְךָ, “to walk in the way of”, has obvious pedagogical connotations.

³² See F. Hitzig, *Der Prophet Jesaja* (Heidelberg, 1833), p. 108; C. L. Hendewerk, *Des Propheten Jesaja Weissagungen* (Königsberg, 1838), pp. 237-238; E. Meier, *Der Prophet Jesaja* (Pforzheim, 1850), p. 109. The same idea is also pondered by Kaiser (*Jesaja*, p. 189), yet he apparently still presupposes that v. 16 refers to the *Denkschrift* as a whole.

³³ כְּחֶזְקַת הַיָּד is a unique genitival construction lit. meaning “as the sizing (inf. cstr.) of the hand” or “as the power of the hand”. This does not refer to ecstatic experience as often suggested (Wildberger, *Jesaja*, pp. 334, 336; Beuken, *Jesaja*, p. 228). Ezek 3:14 (cf. also Ezek 1:3; 8:1; 37:1), mentioned in this respect, is obviously a different case. Similarly, it is also misleading to interpret כְּחֶזְקַת הַיָּד as if alluding to God’s strong hand (subjective genitive), i.e. a forceful intervention in the life of the prophet (so KJV, ERV, JPS Tanakh [1917], NASV). Note that the motif appears here in connection with “speaking”. I suggest relating this unique nominal phrase to the verbal construction חִזַּק pi. + דָּ, also having the sense of “to strengthen the hand”, i.e. to encourage someone (cf. Judg 7:11; 2 Chr 15:7; Ezr 6:22; Isa 35:3; Jer 23:14; Job 4:3 [cf. Hos 7:15]; etc.; the opposite is רָפָה + יָד, “to loose courage”, as in 2 Chr 15:7; Neh 6:9; Job 4:3; Isa 35:3; Jer 38:4; Zeph 3:16). Another option could be to connect כְּחֶזְקַת הַיָּד with חִזַּק hif. + דָּ, “to take someone by hand” (cf. Gen 19:16; Isa 42:6; 51:8; Jer 31:32), i.e. to lead someone. Cf. Leidse Vertaling (1912); JPS Tanakh (1985): “when He took me by the hand”.

³⁴ Cf. Deut 4:36; 1 Chr 15:22; Job 4:3; Prov 31:1; Isa 28:26; Hos 7:15.

³⁵ In Isa 28:26 יָסַר (teaching to do it the right way) appears in parallelism with יָרָה. In Jer 31:8, יָסַר is used in connection with לָמַד. In Ps 94:10.12, יָסַר is related to לָמַד, תּוֹרָה, and דָּעַת. Strikingly, both the motif of ‘encouraging one’ as well as the verb יָסַר appear together in Job 4:3 and Hos 7:15. These parallels also confirm the reliability of the MT (cf. also Vulgate, Targum) over against suggestions to emend ויסרני to ויסרני (from סור hif., ‘to remove, cause to turn aside’). Such emenda-

Concluding, the instruction and admonition in Isa 8:16 is to be identified in the first instance with the short instructive prophecy which precedes this verse, i.e. Isa 8:12-15, and not the Isaiah-memoir or some other longer composition. It is this particular תּוֹרָה / תְּעוּדָה which is to be bound up and sealed among the disciples.

What does the term לְמִד stand for? What kind of disciple does this word designate? It appears that the later rabbinic institution of discipleship which has eventually found its way into the writings of the New Testament has exerted undue influence on the interpretation of Isa 8:16. In the context of the Old Testament, however, לְמִד is an infrequent word. We have no evidence that a prophet's supporters would have been called לְמוֹדִים. With relevance for Isa 8:16, the term לְמִד is used further only in Isa 50:4 and 54:13.³⁶ In the combination לְשׁוֹן לְמוֹדִים and לְשִׁמְעַ כְּלִמוֹדִים in Isa 50:4, לְמִד refers to an educated individual who has acquired proficiency in speaking (eloquently) and who has learned listening to a teacher.³⁷ In Isa 54:13, the Hebrew text is uncertain. "All your sons (בְּנֵיךָ) shall be the disciples of YHWH" should probably be changed into "all your builders (בְּנֵיךָ) shall be the instructed ones of YHWH".³⁸ If this emendation is correct, לְמִד designates instructed workers, i.e. skilled craftsmen. Consequently, לְמִד is not the full equivalent of תַּלְמִיד, the usual term for a rabbinic 'disciple'.

I noted above with regard to תּוֹרָה that the book of Isaiah considers the prophetic word as instruction *par excellence*. I believe that the use of the term לְמִד

tions are argued to be supported by ancient witnesses (cf. Wildberger, *Jesaja*, p. 334; D. Barthélemy [ed.], *Critique textuelle de l'Ancien Testament. Isaïe, Jérémie, Lamentations* [OBO, 50/2; Göttingen, 1986], pp. 54-56; Beuken, *Jesaja*, p. 214). However, it is more likely that ancient exegetes felt the difficulties in relating the verb יסר to the prophet Isaiah exactly because יסר appears often with the meaning 'to discipline, chasten, punish' in a physical sense, which is obviously inapt in relation to a prophet. The problems around interpreting this text are clearly signalled in the early Jewish reception history of Isa 8:11. Cf. Barthélemy (ed.), *Critique*, pp. 55-56. In 1QIsa^a, the change of יסר to סור is motivated by the wish to connect the "strong hand" motif with סור (1QIsa^a dropped the connective ו!). Furthermore, 1QIsa^a also reads יסירנו, 'he caused us to turn away', which suggests that the scribe understood this סור to refer to a larger group of people (and not just the prophet) who had formerly lost the right way but were turned back by YHWH. This understanding is also implied by some other Qumranic texts mentioned by Barthélemy (ed.), *Critique*, p. 55.

³⁶ In Jer 2:24 and 13:23, לְמִד, 'accustomed to' appears to be related with the pu. לְמִד / מְלִמֵד (cf. Akkadian *lummudu*, 'taught, instructed; tamed'; J. Black et al., *A Concise Akkadian Dictionary* [Wiesbaden, 2000], p. 185).

³⁷ In this educational context, מרה refers to rebellious pupils, an attitude familiar from ancient texts about school life.

³⁸ Cf. 1QIsa^a, b. Ber 65a. The imagery of builders suits the previous verse better.

should also be understood against this specific background. Insofar as the act of prophesying is ירה (Isa 28:9) and למד (Isa 29:13.24), and the content of this instruction is תורה, the audience of the prophet *in general* is properly identified as למד. That means, the group of people that Isa 8:16 refers to are called למודים, 'disciples', insofar as they represent that layer of the society of Jerusalem which opened its mind to the prophet's instructions and accepted the teaching proclaimed during Isaiah's public appearances. 'Disciples' is not an esoteric group established *a priori* as a distinctive guild among Isaiah's audience, standing in some privileged relationship with him.

3.2. *The Disciples and the Instruction*

In addition to the terminological clarification, several important conclusions with regard to the identity and interest of the disciples in Isa 8:16 can also be drawn from the text of the instruction entrusted to this group of people, especially vv. 12-13.

- 12 Do not call "conspiracy" all that this people calls "conspiracy",
and do not fear what it fears, or be in dread.
- 13 But YHWH of hosts, him you shall regard as holy;
let him be your fear, and let him be your dread.

What conspiracy does the divine instruction refer to? The Hebrew word קשר can be understood only in a political sense, as an allusion to a complot.³⁹ There are basically three distinctive opinions among the exegetes. Some of them believe that during the time of Ahaz, a certain group in Jerusalem intended to desert and choose the side of Samaria and Damascus. This opinion is based on Isa 7:6 according to which there was a plan to set up a "son of Tabeal" (or Tabeel), as king in Jerusalem. Wildberger speculates that this candidate-king could refer to another descendant of David who might have enjoyed the support of a part of the Judaeian community over against the house of Ahaz.⁴⁰ His hypothesis lacks any considerable historical proof, however, and it contradicts Isa 8:16 according to which 'conspiracy' is shouted by "this whole people" (i.e. Jerusalem in general).

Another more widely defended hypothesis is that the term 'conspiracy' (קשר) refers to the prophesying of Isaiah. The prophet's opponents considered

³⁹ 1 Sam 22:8.13; 2 Sam 15:12.31; 1 Kgs 16:9.16.20; 2 Kgs 9:14; 10:9; 15:10.15.25.30; 17:4; 21:23.24; etc.

⁴⁰ Wildberger, *Jesaja*, pp. 275, 337.

his messages of judgment high treason.⁴¹ Support for this opinion is derived from Am 7:10. Amos, the prophet criticising Jeroboam, is charged to have conspired (קשר) against the king. However attractive this suggestion might seem, it has a major problem. The book of Amos describes this prophet as one pronouncing judgment against Jeroboam, unlike Isaiah, who encourages Jerusalem and the house of Ahaz (Isa 7; 8:1-4). It is this positive message that the people have rejected (8:6) and not the judgment prophecies as in case of Amos.

A more likely suggestion is derived from v. 12 and the Ahaz-related stories in general. In Isa 8:12, "shouting 'conspiracy!'" stands in synonymous poetic parallelism with "being afraid of what this people is afraid of". V. 12 states rather plainly that it is the conspiracy (of Aram and Israel) itself of which the people were terrorised. The background is worked out in more details in the narrative of Isa 7, especially in v. 2: "Now, when it was reported to the House of David that Aram had allied itself with Ephraim, their hearts and the hearts of their people trembled as trees of the forest sway before a wind." By urging the disciples not to call conspiracy all that which this people calls conspiracy, Isaiah admonishes them not to be afraid of the allied forces as is the rest of the people.⁴²

This brings us to an important observation. Actually, there is nothing obscure about the teaching that these so-called 'disciples' receive. It is not a specific and new revelation. The encouraging message of the divine instruction was the core of the Isaianic repertoire from the start. This former prophetic instruction will retain its validity, but it will now be entrusted to a small community willing to be instructed by YHWH's prophet and therefore properly called 'disciples', לְמִנְדִּים. The statement of v. 14 makes clear that Isaiah does not envisage a total destruction of Judah here. YHWH "will become a sanctuary (for the disciples); but a stone one strikes against and a rock one stumbles over he will be for both houses of Israel (Ephraim and Manasseh; cf. Isa 9:20), a trap and a snare for the inhabitants of Jerusalem."

⁴¹ Clements, *Isaiah*, p. 99; Becker, *Botschaft*, p. 201; Barthel, *Prophetenwort*, p. 224; De Jong, *Isaiah*, p. 71.

⁴² L. G. Rignell, "Das Orakel 'Maher-salal Has-baz'. Jesaja 8", *StTh* 10 (1957), p. 45, comes to a similar conclusion. The objection of Wildberger that קשר is not used in connection with an external enemy (Wildberger, *Jesaja*, p. 337; cf. also Barthel, *Prophetenwort*, p. 224) contradicts the evidence of 2 Kgs 17:4, in which King Hoshea's rebellion against the Assyrian king is called קשר. The word קשר simply means a political alliance. Whether this refers to domestic or foreign connections goes beyond the semantic field of the term. See further 2 Kgs 11:14; 2 Chr 23:13; cf. also 2 Kgs 9:23 with 9:14.

Above I argued for the coherence of vv. 11-22 as a whole and for the central position that vv. 16-18 occupy in this section. The people whom Isaiah addresses in vv. 19-20 directly are the same as the disciples referred to in vv. 12-16. Vv. 19-20 provide additional insights into the identity of these disciples.⁴³

- 19 Now should they say to you:
 “Consult the ghosts and the spirits that chirp and mutter”—
 (say to them:) Should not a people consult their gods?
 (Should they consult) the dead on behalf of the living?⁴⁴
- 20 To the teaching and the testimony!

This pericope presupposes the same distinction between the people (simply referred to as ‘they’) and the smaller group of ‘disciples’. The people turn to the ghosts and the spirits as alternative sources of revelation, strictly forbidden in the Bible.⁴⁵ 1 Sam 28 narrates the story of King Saul requesting the help of a medium. This text motivates Saul’s fatal step by the fact that he was very afraid of the Philistians (v. 5), and he received no revelation from YHWH (v. 6). Necromancy as a desperate means of obtaining clarifications in times of need appears on various occasions in Isaiah as well (cf. Isa 19:1-4; 28:14-22; 29:4). The political situation in the background of Isa 8 is similarly fear of the future and the imminent threat of a foreign enemy. Historically speaking, vv. 19-22 coincide well with the statement of 2 Kgs 16:3-5, which brings King Ahaz in connection with practices related to the cult of the dead.⁴⁶

⁴³ I leave here the textually problematic vv. 20b-22 out of discussion.

⁴⁴ Not merely the first question but the entire v. 19(+20a) (“... for teaching and testimony”) is often understood as a citation of those consulting the dead. That would imply that the spirits (אֲרוֹמִים / אֲרוֹמִיָּם) are identified with the gods (אֱלֹהִים) of a nation (cf. Wildberger, *Jesaja*, pp. 342, 351; JPS Tanakh [1917]; NAB; NRSV; Zürcher Bibel, etc.). While 1 Sam 28:13 uses אֲרוֹמִים in the sense of the spirit of a deceased man (called אֲרוֹם on other occasions), the construction the “ghost-god(s) of a nation (!)” is unknown. Dead spirits do not appear with possessive suffixes. They are never called the gods of someone, not to mention gods of a nation. The context makes clear that the disciples addressed by the people do consult *their* God, YHWH. It is therefore not the bare fact of searching for an oracle which is the people’s problem with these disciples. They are rather urged to consult the dead for revelation. Isa 8:9 is a rhetorical and sarcastic response of the prophet on behalf of those disciples.

⁴⁵ Deut 18:9-22 presents prophecy as a means of revelation in opposition to practices exactly such as those also mentioned in Isa 8:19.

⁴⁶ The note “he even made his son pass through fire” reminds one of the Moloch cult in Judah, which is probably alluded at in the difficult text of Isa 8:21: וְקָלַל בְּמַלְכוֹ וּבְאֱלֹהֵי מַלְכּוֹ, “he will curse his ‘king’ (מַלְךְ) and his god”, i.e. his god Moloch (hendiadys; see also 2 Kgs 21:6). Isaiah’s rather enigmatic proposal to Ahaz in 7:11 to ask for a sign from YHWH “either in the depth of sheol (הַעֲמֻקָּה)

The fact that the disciples are incited by others to consult the dead for an oracle, as well as the prophet's admonition to turn to the teaching and the testimony instead, is an indirect confirmation that the לְמוֹדִים is not a prophetic group, a guild of הַנְּבִיאִים. It would make no sense to summon prophets to look for divine revelation by other intermediaries, or admonish them not to do so. If it is right to connect vv. 19-22 to Ahaz' time, and if the quest for an oracle was prompted by the threat of Samaria and Damascus (cf. v. 12), then it is not to be excluded that the addressees, the לְמוֹדִים, were actually high officials with strong interest in the outcome of the current political crisis. Dating vv. 19-22 to the years before 733 makes also good sense of the advice of the prophet to turn to the 'instruction'. So long as the situation remains unchanged, the teaching ("do not be afraid") retains its validity.⁴⁷

4. The Disciples and the Problem of the Sealed Instruction

One last issue to be discussed is how the sealing of the divine instruction could be interpreted. Is the act of sealing a means of preserving Isaiah's teaching for future generations with the mediation of the disciples, as often argued?⁴⁸ If the instruction is indeed the short text preserved in vv. 12-15, as suggested above, strongly related to the historical situation of 733, and if the לְמוֹדִים were those heeding to the prophet's teaching, then it is unlikely that the act of sealing would have significance primarily for the post-Isaianic generations.

In fact, the view that sealing is an act of preserving the prophecy for the future was developed under the influence of late biblical texts such as Dan 8:26; 12:4.9.⁴⁹ Imposing the apocalyptic model upon Isa 8:16 raises a number of questions,

לְשָׁאֵלָה) or in/on the heights above (הַגְּבוּהָ לְמַעְלָה)" might also be correlated with Ahaz' religious interest in high places and chthonic cult.

⁴⁷ Wildberger (*Jesaja*, p. 349) maintains that in v. 20, the terms 'instruction' and 'testimony' refer to "der Nachlaß der prophetischen Bewegung", a longer literary composition (cf. Kaiser, *Jesaja*, p. 193 ["das geschriebene Gottesgesetz"]; Barthel, *Prophetenwort*, p. 230). However, the תּוֹרָה of v. 20 need not be a more elaborate instruction than the one mentioned in v. 16. As I noted, turning to the dead is motivated by fear of what is to be expected. For such people, the earlier encouragement, "do not be afraid" (vv. 12-13), is sufficient.

⁴⁸ See most recently Isbell, "Limmûdîm", pp. 99-101.

⁴⁹ Cf. also Rev 5:1; 7:3; 10:4; 22:10. See Wildberger, *Jesaja*, p. 346; Kaiser, *Jesaja*, p. 190; Beuken, *Jesaja*, p. 231; Barthel, *Prophetenwort*, pp. 233-236. The motif of sealing also appears in Isa 29:21. However, this verse does not refer to a concrete document but to any sealed writing which cannot be read unless opened and unfolded. The understanding function of the motif of sealing on this place is completely different from Dan and Rev.

however. It is commonly known that the author of Daniel worked with a very specific view of predictions, assuming that events could be predicted centuries ahead of their fulfilment. Naturally, such events could not have been understood when they were 'originally' given. It was for this reason that they had to be sealed. On the other hand, Isa 8:16 works with a completely different view of prophetic prediction. Isaiah's message was addressed to a particular audience in a specific situation.

In antiquity, sealing had primarily a *legal* connotation of authentication, with no inherent temporal significance. A document was sealed as a means of attestation and originality and not in view of being preserved for coming generations.⁵⁰ This aspect of authenticity is also central to Isa 8:1-4, as underlined by the term עֲדִיּוּ. Witnesses can testify as long as they live, for their own generation. This legal background should likely also be granted to Isa 8:16.

In his recent book on the making of the Old Testament, K. van der Toorn comes to the following conclusion:⁵¹

Their [the prophets'] purpose in writing, however, was confined to communicating a message to their contemporaries. They resorted to the written word when they judged an oral delivery less apt to reach their intended audience. Not a single time, though, did they write in view of preserving their words for future generations.

One may dispute the reason Van der Toorn has given here for preserving prophecies. One may doubt his opinion that "the prophets... did not record the oracles they delivered" (*ibid.*).⁵² Nevertheless, he convincingly argues that posterity is not the only possible audience for which prophetic texts were written and certainly not the primary one.⁵³ A sealed document had direct relevance to its actual possessor. Therefore, the fact that the teaching is sealed

⁵⁰ Cf. 1 Kgs 21:8; Neh 10:1; Est 3:12; 8:8,10; Jer 32 (especially 32:44).

⁵¹ K. van der Toorn, *Scribal Culture and the Making of the Hebrew Bible* (Cambridge, MA, 2007), p. 182.

⁵² Cf. discussion in Dekker, "Bind Up", pp. 63-88.

⁵³ Although Isa 30:8 could be argued to highlight the significance of Isaianic words for a more remote future (cf. Williamson, *Book*, pp. 105-106), one can also make a good case there for interpreting יוֹם אֲתָרוֹן, "the days to come", and עַד-עוֹלָם, "forever", in a rhetorical sense (cf. 1 Sam 1:22; 2 Sam 3:28; 12:10; Jer 17:4). The reason we believe Isa 30:8 would refer to the distant future is again due to the influence of the book of Isaiah as an existing literary whole in which this rhetorical statement is located. But it can be just as well Isaiah's generation of rebellious sons that the text is concerned with. That aspect is also evident in Isa 8:1 if one identifies the two witnesses of the

among the disciples means, in the first instance, that they are in possession of authentic revelation and teaching and *not* that this instruction is supposed to be preserved for the future, even though we are tempted to read v. 16 that way due to the present literary form of the book in which this verse is now located.⁵⁴ What is to be recorded is, first of all, instruction with immediate relevance for its addressees; it is not a prediction. To the extent that prediction is present (vv. 14-15) that has only a secondary, pedagogical purpose of encouragement for the disciples. It was definitely not a map of how Isaiah believed the future would take shape; it was not the proclamation of unconditional doom.⁵⁵

5. Conclusion

While Isa 8:16 is believed to hold significant information regarding the composition of the book of Isaiah and the role of prophetic disciples in this process, a closer look at this passage reveals a more limited primary significance. The terms 'testimony' and 'instruction' refer in the first instance to the short pericope immediately preceding v. 16, i.e. Isa 8:12-15, and not an early collection of Isaianic prophecies. The terminology of v. 16 is well suited to Isa 1-39 considering prophesying primarily as an act of instruction and of prophecy as teaching. The correlation between תּוֹרָה and לְמוֹדִים is to be explained against this specific Isaianic understanding of the nature of prophecy. The לְמוֹדִים are not special groups of prophets, neither a school of prophets' sons. They are YHWH's disciples, not Isaiah's. The term 'the instructed ones' is a general designation for Isaiah's audience, those who listen to God's word and follow his 'instructions'. The content of the instruction in vv. 12-15 and the prophet's admonitions in vv. 19-20 suggest that these 'disciples' were probably influential persons in Jerusalem. The view that the sealing of the instruction would allude to preserving prophetic teaching for the posterity is discounted here in favour of

prophetic revelation with Uriah and Zechariah, as it is suggested by the present form of the text. The witnesses can testify to the authenticity of the prophecy only for their own generation.

⁵⁴ One cannot be sure whether the act of sealing was indeed actually performed (i.e. the prophet wrote down the 'instruction' and handed it over to the disciples) because we have no confirmation that Isaiah would have executed this order. As with so many other prophetic symbolic actions (including Isa 8:1; 30:8), it can be this written form, the retelling of the intention, that was supposed to bring its meaning to the surface.

⁵⁵ The fact that Isa 8:17 refers to waiting for YHWH's gracious turning back rather than for the fulfilment of judgment speeches, has been convincingly argued by Williamson, *Book*, pp. 99-100.

understanding this act as a metaphor taken from the legal sphere where it represents authentication. The addresses, the 'disciples', receive these authentic instructions to adhere to them, to make use of them and not in order to conceal them for coming generations. Isa 8:16 is no evidence for recording prophecy with any other except the current historical situation and addressees in mind.