A Rose by Any Other Name: Iconography and the Interpretation of Isaiah 28:1-6

Rolf A. Jacobson
Luther Seminary, rjacobso@luthersem.edu

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The oracle in Isaiah 28:1–6 includes its share of interpretive cruxes.1 The oracle is addressed to the שפורה נאם תשוכר אפרים שפורה נאם. To what or whom does שפורה נאם refer? To what does the parallel phrase שפורה נאם refer? Who is the need of v. 2? What is the meaning of the שפורה נאם in v 5? How do vv. 5–6 complete the oracle? In the process of exploring these interpretive problems, I will examine how iconography can inform understanding of this passage and propose a coherent interpretation of it.

1.1 The Crown of Ephraim

It is obvious that שפורה נאם in 28:1 is a metaphor. But to what does the metaphor refer? As Willem Beuken has noted, “The crown of the drunkards of Ephraim’ is not a clear figure.”2 One interpretation that has achieved widespread agreement is the view that שפורה נאם means “garland” or “wreath,” and that it refers to the walls of Samaria, the capital city of Ephraim. One signal that a particular interpretive view has managed to achieve something close to scholarly consensus is when the notes in major study Bibles reflect that interpretation. Consider these notes on Isa 28:1 from various popular study Bibles:

- “Garland, a metaphor for the walls of Samaria, capital of the Northern Kingdom” (Harper Collins Study Bible, Revised Edition).3
- “Garland, walls of Samaria” (New Oxford Annotated Bible).4

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1 An early draft of this essay was written for J.J.M. Roberts’ “Exegesis of First Isaiah” seminar at Princeton Theological Seminary in the fall of 1997. I wish to thank Dr. Roberts, who is a teacher without equal and whose boots I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I also wish to thank Justin Schlesinger-Devlin and Laura Kaslow for help with the illustrations.


— “Wreath. Samaria, the capital of the northern kingdom, was a beautiful city on a prominent hill” (NIV Study Bible).²

The purpose of citing the notes of these three popular study Bibles is simply to underscore how widespread is the view that the metaphor of the “proud crown of Ephraim” refers to Samaria, whose walls supposedly bore a resemblance to a crown. In light of Beuken’s earlier caution,³ Otto Kaiser probably overstates the degree of scholarly consensus on this issue, but as a foil, his conclusion is worth citing: “Modern commentators are unanimous in relating this prophecy of warning, taking the form of a stylized proclama-
tion of woe, to the city of Samaria, and in attributing it to Isaiah.”⁴

The most comprehensive expression of this interpretation is that of Hans Wildberger.⁵ Wildberger argues that לאַ כּוֹן אֲבָרִים has a double meaning; it means both “proud crown” and “proud garland.” On the one hand, Wildberger argues that the לאַ כּוֹן אֲבָרִים, “proud crown,” refers to the city walls of Samaria. Wildberger bases this argument on a perceived visual similarity between a crown atop a head and the walls of Samaria atop its hill. In Wildberger’s mind’s eye, the two images coincide: “It makes sense to com-
pare a city to a crown upon a head when one considers how a city is positioned on the upper part of a hill, with its walls looking very much like a crown [...]”⁶ Wildberger further argues that the Hebrew word לאַ כּוֹן carries a second, or double meaning in addition to crown, which is closer to “gar-
land.” “The לאַ כּוֹן (here: “crown”) is, of course, not exactly what we think a crown to be, but [...] a wreath of flowers, and the boozers in ancient times loved to crown themselves with flowers that had been interwoven.”⁷ Building on his belief that the “proud garland of the drunkards of Ephraim” is a reference to the practice of drunks crowning themselves with garlands, Wildberger says that crowning oneself is an act of grandeur born of “high spirits.” Thus, Wildberger understands Isaiah 28:1ff. to be a prophecy of

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² Victor Gold and William Holladay, “Note on Isaiah 28:1,” New Oxford Annotated Bible (New York, 1991), 901 (OT); note that the 3rd edition of the NOAB no longer offers an interpretive gloss on the “garland,” but does refer to the passage as an “oracle against the Northern King-
dom” (1014 [Hebrew Bible]).


⁴ Although note that in the end, Beuken agrees that the “crown” here refers to Samaria (Isaiah II, 24).

⁵ Isaiah 13–39: A Commentary (OTL; Philadelphia, 1974), 237. It should be noted that Otto Kaiser differs in part from this majority interpretation. He dates the prophecy to the post-exilic era. Kaiser does take “proud crown” as a reference to a city, although he is not sure if it is Samaria.


⁸ Ibid.
Isaiah of Jerusalem against the people of Samaria, who like high-spirited drunkards were hiding from the harsh reality of Tiglath-Pileser’s impending invasion. “Because of the double meaning of נְפָרָה Isaiah can speak initially about the wreath of the drunks and then still use the same word to speak about the crown that is perched above a lush valley.” Thus for Wildberger the crown is both a metaphor for the city of Samaria (because the city walls look like a crown) and also a metaphor for the people (because drunks in antiquity allegedly crowned themselves with garlands). Either way, Wildberger understands the target of this oracle to be Samaria, the capital city of the northern kingdom.

1.2 נְפָרָה as City Walls

It is unlikely that Isaiah of Jerusalem’s original audience would have connected the metaphor of “the proud crown” with either of Wildberger’s two proposed meanings. I will deal with each of his proposed interpretations in order, beginning with the argument that the נְפָרָה is a visual simile for the city walls. Based on both lexicographic and iconographic data, this interpretation is unlikely.

1. Lexicographic Data. As Wildberger himself notes, in the modern German language, one can speak of a hill being “crowned” by a castle or a city. In the English language also, people speak of the crown of a hill. Thus in English or German, the metaphor might function linguistically as Wildberger proposes. The relevant question here, however, is whether in Biblical Hebrew the word נְפָרָה ever carries the semantic sense of a hilltop or of city walls or that Isaiah’s ancient audience would have connected the semantic field denoted by the word נְפָרָה with the concept of a hill being crowned by a city.

The brief answer to the question is that in Biblical Hebrew the word נְפָרָה never refers to a hilltop or city walls. The semantic realm indicated by נְפָרָה is that of royalty; the basic sense of the word is a crown, usually made of precious metal. In Zechariah 6, the term occurs in an oracle in which the prophet is told to make a crown of silver and gold and then coronate Joshua Ben-Jehozadak as king. In 2 Sam 12:30 (//1 Chr 20:2), David takes the golden crown from the head of Milcom (MT: “their king”) and places it on his own head. In Ezek 21:31, Ezekiel prophesies against the “wicked prince of Israel,” saying “lift off the crown.” In Song of Solomon 3:11, the

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11 Ibid.
12 Ibid., 11.
13 This also seems to be the sense of the root ‘ir in Phoenician (KAI 60.1ff.).
daughters of Zion are told to look “at King Solomon, at the crown with which his mother crowned him.” In Ps 21:4, "כתר" refers to the king’s crown of gold. In Est 8:15, Mordecai is given a crown of gold and other symbols of royalty by King Ahasuerus. The fact that Mordecai receives the crown and other signs of royalty are intended to show that he bears the king’s authority. In Jer 13:18, the king and queen mother are told, “your splendid crown (תֵּقوة הָמוֹן הָמְאָרֶארֶבֶּנֶּ) has descended from your heads.” In all of these texts "כתר" is mentioned in the same context as the king or queen, and often the crown is specifically described as being composed of precious metal. This suggests that the meaning of "כתר" within the semantic field of the monarch/monarchy. There is no reason to think that in Isaiah 28:1 it connotes anything other than a royal crown. In Biblical Hebrew, "כתר" is so intimately connected with the person of the sovereign that it is most likely that Isaiah’s original audience would have understood “the proud crown of the drunkards of Ephraim” as a reference not to the walls of Samaria, but to the king of Ephraim.14

There is one Old Testament passage in which "כתר" does refer specifically to a city. In Isa 62:2–3, an oracle concerning the restoration of Jerus-

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14 In addition to this concrete meaning of "כתר" to refer to a physical crown, biblical Hebrew often uses "כתר" metaphorically. Most commonly, "כתר" is a metaphor for the presence or absence of dignity, prosperity and pride. In Lam 5:15, the singer mourns that “the crown has fallen from our head.” Similarly, Job cries out in 19:9 that the crown has been taken from his head. In Job 31:36, Job cries that if an adversary had written a charge against him, “I would tie it on myself as a crown.” Job adds, “like a prince I would approach him.” (Note again that "כתר" is directly associated with the monarch.) The crown is a favorite metaphor in Proverbs. Children are called the crown of age (17:6); a diligent woman is the crown of her husband (12:4); a father instructs his children to seek wisdom who will set a “splendid crown" (כתר) on their heads (49); gray hair is said to be a “splendid crown” (כתר) (16:31); and wisdom is said to be the crown of the wise (14:24). In Ezekiel 16 the prophet offers a long parable in which God is compared with a faithful husband who finds a naked, bloody woman and clothes her, marries her and adorns her with jewelry. Included among the long list of gracious deeds which God the husband does for Jerusalem the wife is, “I placed [...] a splendid crown (כתר) on your head” (v 12). In terms of the argument of this essay, it is important to note that in this passage the woman stands for the city of Jerusalem, and the crown stands for the prosperity and honor God had granted it. When a biblical writer wishes to describe a situation of pride or prosperity, the writer can use the image of the crown sitting on the head. Thus in Proverbs when a father tells his children that Wisdom will “bestow you with a splendid crown,” it means that wisdom will grant you prosperity and dignity. On the other hand, when a biblical writer wishes to express disgrace or falleness, the writer can say that the crown has fallen from the head (Lam 5:15, Job 19:9, etc.). When "כתר" is used metaphorically in these ways, there is no direct connotation of royalty. Rather, it seems, the honor and glory of the monarch have been abstracted and the crown now serves as a symbol of that honor. That is to say, the king’s life is regularly portrayed in the Old Testament as one of honor. When the psalmist wishes to describe God’s saving action, the claim is made that Yahweh “lifts the needy from the ash heap, to make them sit with princes, with the princes of his people” (Ps 113:6b-7, NRSV). Because the life of the royalty was seen as honorable and prosperous, and because the crown was a symbol of royalty, the "כתר" served as the symbol of prosperity and honor. But note that this metaphorical function of "כתר" as a symbol for prosperity is dependent on its primary semantic association with royalty.
lem, נְפֶרֶד refers to Jerusalem. In this passage, Trito-Isaiah speaks of the vindication promised Jerusalem:

Nations shall see your righteousness and all of the kings your honor,
And you will be called by a new name, which the mouth of Yahweh will appoint,
And you will be a splendid crown (נְפֶרֶד תַּמוֹרָה) in Yahweh’s hand, a royal turban in your God’s palm.

This passage does refer to a city – Jerusalem – as a “splendid crown.” Thus, at a first glance it seems as if this passage supports Wildberger’s interpretation that in Isa 28:1 the נְפֶרֶד is a reference to Samaria. But recall that Wildberger bases his interpretation on the visual similarity between the city of walls of Samaria on its hill and a crown on a king’s head. In Isa 62:2–3 nothing of the sort is implied. Isa 62:3 says that Jerusalem will be a “splendid crown” (נְפֶרֶד תַּמוֹרָה) and a “royal turban” (יַנָּקָה מַלָּדָה) in Yahweh’s hand. How could a יַנָּקָה, which carries the sense of a cloth wrapped around the head (thus a turban) be visually confused with a city wall? Thus the parallel use of נְפֶרֶד and יַנָּקָה to refer to Jerusalem requires that the interpreter find a better explanation for why a נְפֶרֶד can refer to a city. Following Ockham’s razor, a more simple explanation is to be found in the fact that Jerusalem was the royal city, and that “crown” and “royal turban” are both symbols of royalty. As noted above, נְפֶרֶד has to do with royalty. The fact that the יַנָּקָה is specifically modified by מַלָּדָה confirms that the issue here is that Jerusalem is the “royal” city. Trito-Isaiah is drawing on the traditional tenets of Zion theology to prophesy the restoration of the delapidated Jerusalem. In the Zion theology of Judah, Jerusalem was the residence of Yahweh the great king (Ps 48:3) and thus the royal city of God. Yahweh’s choice of Jerusalem as his royal dwelling place meant that Yahweh would keep Jerusalem safe and protect her citizens. The point to be underscored here is that Trito-Isaiah’s oracle that Jerusalem will be a “splendid crown in Yahweh’s hand” is dependent not on the visual similarity of crowns and city walls, but on the connection between the נְפֶרֶד as a royal symbol and Jerusalem as the royal city. Based on the parallel in Isaiah 62:3, one still might choose to understand נְפֶרֶד in 28:1 as referring to Samaria. But then one would have to understand that the metaphor is not based on a visual similarity between crown and walls. Rather, one would have to understand the metaphor to be based on the connection between the crown as a symbol of royalty and Samaria as the royal city of Ephraim.

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15 See HALOT 3:1038–39.
2. Iconographic Data. Iconographic data from the ancient Near East offers further reasons to doubt the argument that the מַלְאךָ הָאֱלֹהִים refers to the city walls of Samaria. Recall again that Wildberger based his argument on a perceived visual similarity between a hilltop "crowned" with walls and a crowned head. The visual aspect of the argument can be tested by examining whether ancient iconographic representations of crowns bore any resemblance to fortified cities. The data can be summarized in advance by stating that crowns in antiquity did not visually resemble fortified city walls.¹⁷

Royalty wore a stunning variety of crowns in the Ancient Near East. The singular impression one gains from a survey of iconographic representations of crowns, however, is that kings did not wear the stylized, battlemented crowns that would later become popular in medieval Europe.¹⁸ Neither of the well-known crowns of Egypt — the Blue and White Crowns of Upper and Lower Egypt — are reminiscent of city walls. Fig. 1 shows a line drawing of the Blue Crown. The drawing is taken from a relief of the temple of Seti I; the relief dates from ca. 1301 B.C.E.¹⁹ Fig. 2 shows a line drawing of the White Crown, reproduced from of a relief at Kohns Temple made during the reign of Ptolemais II, 246–221 B.C.E.²⁰ Likewise, statues and figurines from Ugarit offer evidence that at Ras Shamra the crown may have looked very similar to the White Crown, consisting of a tall, cone-shaped crown, perhaps topped with a spherical ornament similar to the White Crown of Egypt. Although not shown here, both Baal and Anat are portrayed in crowns of this fashion.²¹ In a relief that shows the King of Ugarit presenting an offering to El, the king also is adorned with a crown of this type. Clay figurines that may depict the King of Ugarit show analogous crowns. Thus, the iconographic data from Egypt and Ugarit demonstrate the crowns known in these locales did not bear a resemblance to city battlements.

The iconographic representations of Mesopotamian crowns continue to cast doubt on any visual similarity between city walls and crowns. Fig. 3 shows a line drawing detail of King Hammurabi based on the famous relief from the top of Hammurabi's stele. This stele dates from the early second millennium and shows one type of crown well attested in Mesopotamia —

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¹⁸ One gains the suspicion that the visual analogy between crowns and city walls is an anachronistic comparison based on later battlemented medieval crowns.


²⁰ Ibid., 287.

²¹ These figures are not shown here, but see Claude Schaeffer, Cuneiform Texts of Ras Shamra-Ugarit (London, 1939), plates 30 and 35. See also Maurice Dunand, Fouilles de Byblos (Paris, 1926–1932), plates 67–69.
the top is shaped like a dome, the brim of the crown is high but very thin.\textsuperscript{22} 
\textbf{Fig. 4} depicts a line drawing of Ashurnasipal II’s head and crown, based on one of a series of reliefs discovered at Nimrud and dating to the 9th century B.C.E. In all of the reliefs of Nimrud, the king is consistently shown wearing a crown that is conical, marked by its pointed top-piece and its sloped frontal piece.\textsuperscript{23} The Mesopotamian iconographic data is especially relevant, because it provides us with visual renderings of crowns contemporaneous with Isaiah of Jerusalem.\textsuperscript{24} \textbf{Fig. 5} shows a line drawing based on a relief of Sargon II (721–705 B.C.E.) taken from his palace at Khorsabad.\textsuperscript{25} Sargon’s crown – similar to Ashurnasirpal’s – is conical, with a flattened top and smaller conic top-piece protruding above the flat area.

Further examples need not be multiplied. The number of crowns displayed here may seem like overkill, but the task of proving a negative – that Isaiah’s audience would not have associated the images of crown and city walls with each other – requires a concentration of evidence. The iconographic data may be summed up by stating that no known Egyptian, Palestinian, or Mesopotamian crown would support the proposal that an ancient audience would have made a connection between a crown and a visual identification of the walls of a city. Together with the lexicographic data, it is safe to conclude that it is unlikely that Isaiah’s audience would have understood מִשְׁמָרָה נְאָוָה to refer to the walls of Samaria.

1.3 מִשְׁמָרָה נְאָוָה as Drunkards’ Garland

Recall that a second meaning Wildberger posits for מִשְׁמָרָה is “garland.” Wildberger understands the phrase מִשְׁמָרָה נְאָוָה as referring to the garlands with which drunks crowned themselves in antiquity. Based on the assumption that this practice was common and known in Israel and Judah, Wildberger argues that Isaiah employs the image to portray Samaria as a city that refuses to see the impending doom that Tiglath-Pileser would bring down on them. Like drunks who drink in order to hide the truth from

\textsuperscript{22} Henri Frankfort, \textit{The Art and Architecture of the Ancient Orient} (Baltimore, 1955), plate 65. King Gudea is also portrayed in a similar crown, see plates 48–49. 
\textsuperscript{23} J.E. Curtis and J.E. Reade, ed., \textit{Art and Empire: Treasures from Assyria in the British Museum} (London, 1995), 54.
\textsuperscript{24} One well-known image relevant to this study that is not reproduced here shows Tiglath-Pileser III in procession. Tiglath-Pileser III reigned ca. 744–727 B.C.E., and campaigned in Palestine. He may well be the “strong and courageous one” spoken of in Isa 28:2 (see below). The upper register of this relief shows a fortified city (Astartu); note that the king’s crown bears no resemblance to the city. The image may be seen in Curtis and Reade, \textit{Art and Empire}, 63.
themselves, they were hiding their eyes from the harsh reality of Assyria’s imminent invasion.\(^{26}\) Wildberger asserts that while the primary evidence for the custom of “wreaths being worn during drinking parties [comes] from the country of Greece […] Evidence for the same practice is found in the OT in Ezek. 23:42.”\(^{27}\) But does Ezek 23:42 support the conclusion that this ancient Greek custom was known in Israel? This text is part of the larger parable of Oholah and Oholibah. The two women, who are said to represent Samaria and Jerusalem respectively, are wives of Yahweh who play the whore with foreign nations. In 23:42, drunken men come from the wilderness and adorn the women with bracelets and place “splendid crowns” (ענברת המ砝א) on their heads. It is crucial to note, however, that in the Ezekiel passage the drunken men do not wear crowns themselves, rather they enter and place crowns on ר אות ו – “their heads” – that is, on the heads of Oholah and Oholibah (who are never said to be drunk).\(^{28}\) The 3. pers. fem. pronominal suffix on the noun allows no other interpretation. Ezek 23:42, therefore, cannot be used as evidence that the practice of drunks crowning themselves with garlands was known in Israel. Thus this passage does not support Wildberger’s argument about the second meaning of מawah נאות נפראים אפרים. Another interpretation must be found.\(^{29}\)

\(^{26}\) Wildberger, Isaiah 28–39, 8.

\(^{27}\) Ibid. 8.

\(^{28}\) The broader meaning of Isaiah’s reference to drunkenness here is clear – he is using the metaphor to symbolize those who fail either to discern or to follow the will of the Lord. In verses 1 and 3, Isaiah uses the epithet “the proud crown of the drunks of Ephraim,” and in verse 1c Isaiah refers to the people of Samaria as “those struck down by wine.” Wildberger wanted to understand the reference to drunkenness as Isaiah’s judgment on a nation that – like highspirited drunks – would not acknowledge the truth of its precarious situation. Several other passages in Isaiah that refer to drunkenness suggest a more nuanced meaning. In the well-known passage in Isa 5:11–12, Isaiah castigates those who “pursue beer” (NRSV: strong drink) because “they do not consider the work of Yahweh and do not see the work of his hands.” In Isa 28:7, the prophet cries out against priest and prophet who are so drunk that they “err in vision and stumble in giving a decision.” Isa 29:9–11 contains an oracle against prophets and seers who behave as though drunk (“Be drunk, but not from wine”) in that they cannot discern the meaning of their visions. In all of these passages, Isaiah uses the metaphor of drunkenness to portray those who fail to discern the will of Yahweh. Isa 28:1–6 should be understood analogously. Isaiah is saying that the men making policy for the northern kingdom can be likened to drunks who cannot understand a sign from Yahweh. Yahweh has given sign and portent, but the leaders either refuse to regard them or are unable to see them. Therefore they will be swept away by the one who is to come.

\(^{29}\) Wildberger bases part of his argument on the textually difficult phrase that is found in verses 1 and 4: רות נאות נפראים אפרים. The textual problem is with the word אפרים. In both verses 1 and 4, 1QpIsa\(^{a}\) has אפרים, presumably related to the root bà’a, “to be high/haughty.” LXX offers some support for following Qumran, since the Greek ἐπιθετον translates נאות in Isa 2:12 and other places. The parallel phrase also supports reading אפרים. Wildberger believes that אפרים is an interpolation that does not belong in v 1, because it was imported later from verse 4 (thus the verse reads: “upon the head of those who are under the influence of wine,” pp. 2–3). This emendation, for which there is no external evidence, must be rejected as speculative. Regarding verse 4, Wildberger retains the MT, concluding, “The proud crown of the drunks of Ephraim refers to Samaria
1.4 The King of the Ephraim

Often in interpretation, the most simple explanation is the best. Since the basic sense of מַעֲרַד is of a king's crown, I believe that Isaiah's reference to the "proud crown of the drunkards of Ephraim" is a reference to the king of Ephraim. In the rest of this essay, I will offer supporting reasons for this suggestion and show how this interpretation makes better sense of the oracle in 28:1–6 and also helps understand the original rhetorical function of the oracle.

2. קְרֵן הַנָּכָר עַל חֲפָרָהוֹ

2.1 קְרֵן הַנָּכָר: "Fading Flower"

Another problematic issue is what one is to make of the compound phrase קְרֵן הַנָּכָר עַל חֲפָרָהוֹ, translated by the NRSV as "the fading flower of its glorious beauty."

First, how shall one understand קְרֵן הַנָּכָר? This phrase occurs parallel to "proud crown" and may best be understood synonymously. No matter how one interprets "proud crown," one needs to have a convincing explanation for how "fading flower" functions in parallel to "proud crown." As almost every commentator points out, the flower is a favorite biblical symbol for transitoriness (cf. Isa 40:6ff.; Job 14:2; Ps 103:15; etc.), and thus it is possible to apply the metaphor to the city of Samaria, understanding that Isaiah is here employing the metaphor to announce that Samaria will be destroyed. But there is good reason to understand קְרֵן הַנָּכָר not as a reference to the city of Samaria but to the king who dwells there. Doubtless it is true that Isaiah is drawing upon the flower as a symbol of transitoriness. But Isaiah, who is accomplished at the art of double entendre, may also be drawing upon the flower as a symbol of royalty. In this context the קְרֵן should be understood as a "rosette" – which was a symbol for royalty in the ancient Near East.

There is considerable evidence that both in Israel and its surrounding cultures the rosette was a symbol of the monarchy.30 Outside of Israel, the

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rosette emblem is attested as a royal symbol as early as the Hittite empire, where seal impressions have been found with the motif. Fig. 6 shows a 9th-century B.C.E. statue of a king that was recovered from Malatya. The key feature is the ring of eight-petalled rosettes that adorn the crown.\textsuperscript{31} Fig. 7 shows a bust that is presumed to be a 9th- or 8th-century B.C.E. representation of an Ammonite king; this bust also has a ring of rosettes lining the crown.\textsuperscript{32} These two crowns suggest that the rosette was an emblem denoting royalty — and tellingly, because the rosette was an emblem that adorned ancient Near Eastern crowns. Another telling use of the rosette motif comes from the Neo-Assyrian kings, some of whom were contemporaries of Isaiah. Fig. 8 shows Ashurnasirpal II depicted with rosettes on the bracelets on his wrists, with rosettes on his crown, and with his rosettes completely covering his robe.\textsuperscript{33} Almost every Neo-Assyrian king following Ashurnasirpal is likewise depicted wearing the rosette emblem. Some scholars have held that the rosette is merely an artistic decoration. But David Ussishkin has argued that the rosette is a royal emblem. Ussishkin points out that a relief showing Sennacherib was defaced at two places — the crown and the wrist.\textsuperscript{34} Based on numerous parallel images, Ussishkin concludes that the crown and wrist were once adorned with rosettes. Because the relief was only vandalized at those two places, Ussishkin concludes that the vandals intentionally defaced the wrist and crown precisely because the rosette was a symbol of royalty. Thus Ussishkin concludes, “The rosette was a royal Assyrian emblem [...]”\textsuperscript{35}

Within Judah, almost 250 ceramic jar handles bearing rosette impressions have been discovered from twenty-three different sites (for an example, see fig. 9).\textsuperscript{36} The rosettes consist of a varied number of petals arranged evenly around a central dot. The jar handles date to the 7th century B.C.E., and Jane Cahill and others have argued persuasively that in the mid-seventh century the rosette stamp replaced the לְמַלְכָּא stamp on royal storage jars and decanters.\textsuperscript{37} The rosette motif is also attested on a seal found in Jerusalem that bears the inscription לְמַלְכָּא בֶּת מָדָנָא “[belonging to] Ma’danah, daughter of the king.”\textsuperscript{38} On the seal there is a twelve-stringed lyre; on the

\textsuperscript{17} Nahman Avigad, “The King’s Daughter and the Lyre,” \textit{IEJ} 28 (1978): 146–51. The rosette is related to the sun emblem, which functioned as a symbol for both gods and royalty. Both the rosette and the sun emblem signify the protection and blessing of the gods. The rosette may have been derived secondarily from the use of the sun emblem.

\textsuperscript{31} Cahill, “Fit For a King,” 54.

\textsuperscript{32} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{33} Ibid., 55.

\textsuperscript{34} Ibid., 56.

\textsuperscript{35} David Ussishkin, \textit{The Conquest of Lachish by Sennacherib} (Tel Aviv, 1982), 115.

\textsuperscript{36} Cahill, “Fit For a King,” 48.

\textsuperscript{37} Cahill, “Fit For a King,” and “Rosette Stamp Seal Impressions.”

\textsuperscript{38} Avigad, “The King’s Daughter.”
lyre is a ten-petalled rosette. The orthography of the seal suggests a 7th-century B.C.E. date. The existence of the rosette emblem on the seal of a daughter of the king supports the use of the rosette as a symbol of royalty in Judah. Gabriel Barkay has published a scale weight bearing the rosette impression. The scale's shape and size suggest an 8th- or 7th-century date. Other similar scale weights exist with the inscription. As was the case with the storage jars, Barkay concluded that the rosette replaced the למלך as the royal stamp. To summarize, the use of the rosette emblem as a royal symbol is well testified in Judah, particularly in the Neo-Assyrian period. In addition, the widespread use of the rosette motif on crowns suggests a possible connection between the "crown" and "flower" of Isa 28:1–6. Therefore, there is strong warrant for associating the phrase יין נבל with the rosette emblem – and, in fact, for understanding it as a reference to the crown of the northern king.

To summarize the argument regarding יין נבל, the rosette was a symbol for royalty in Judah as well as in its neighboring cultures. Use of the symbol is widely attested during Isaiah’s time. Further, there seems to be good reason to associate the word יין with the rosette. It seems then that the יין of Isaiah 28:1 is a reference to the rosette as a symbol of royalty. Based on the Neo-Assyrian crowns which were adorned with rosettes and the fact that יין נבל occurs here in parallel with “proud crown,” it is even possible that we have here a reference to the actual crown of the King

39 Ibid., 151.
41 In several biblical texts, יין is used to describe the ornamental headware of the high-priest. Exod 28:36-38 and 39:30-31 describe that on the high priest’s turban there was a יין הדבש on which was inscribed "holy to Yahweh." Lev 8:9 says that Moses placed a turban on the head of Aaron, "and on the front of the turban, at the front of his face, he set the golden flower of the holy crown (ינא הדבש נוה כדirus):" This description purports to be about Aaron’s turban, but should be taken as representing the later high priest’s headware. Although these passages describe the high priest’s turban and not the king’s crown, they give us evidence that יין can refer to an emblem on a crown. All three passages also interpret the יין as a symbol of divine favor – an interpretation that fits in well with the rosette as a symbol of royalty. 1 Kings 6 contains a description of Solomon’s temple. According to 6:18, 29, 32 and 35, there were אמרי זנים ("opened blooms") carved on the walls of the nave, on the inner sanctuary doors, and on the nave doors. A Persian royal palace, the Tripylon at Persepolis, provides a parallel that may help us understand the meaning of these carved flowers. The palace was designed as a royal center to which foreign nations would come to seek audience with and bring tribute to the king. Along a stairway up which foreign processions would have climbed when they approached for an audience, carved into the walls along the stairs were scenes of foreigners bearing tribute. Above the figures in procession is an endless row of rosettes. The carvings on the wall would have had an obvious propagandistic effect on foreign dignitaries who had come to bring tribute. The rosettes were part of the propaganda, a signal of who was the true king. The "opened blooms" in the temple can be understood analogously. They may have functioned as a symbol that Yahweh was the great king and that the temple was his dwelling place (Ps 46:4; 48:3). The careful designation of the flowers as "opened" and the instructive parallel from Persepolis suggest that we should understand these flowers as rosettes.
of Ephraim. Isaiah was apparently drawing on both the common understanding of the צבעי תמארות as a symbol for royalty and as a symbol for the transitoriness of human life. Isaiah was saying that as quickly as the flowers of the field fade, so too the King of Ephraim would disappear. I am suggesting that when Isaiah called out to the “fading flower” of Samaria, his original audience would have heard this as an ironic reference to the King of Israel, in which Isaiah was playing on the use of the flower/rosette emblem as a symbol of royalty and also as a symbol of transitoriness. Isaiah was announcing that the royal plans – and indeed the person – of the northern kingdom would soon pass away.

2.2: "Glorious Beauty"?

The phrase צבעי תמארות, as noted above, is a compound phrase. In terms of the last two words of the phrase, Mordechai Gilula has argued that צבעי תמארות “must mean some kind of a head ornament.”\(^{42}\) can either refer to a gazelle (Deut 12:15, 22; 14:5; 1 Kg 5:3; Isa 13:14; etc.) or to an ornament/splendor (Isa 13:14; 2 Sam 1:19; etc.). Gilula points out that the “Canaanite god Reshef is usually depicted on Egyptian monuments as wearing a head-gear in the likeness of a deer […] it seems possible that the prophet Isaiah had such an ornament in mind.”\(^{43}\) It should also be noted that the 3. masc. sing. suffix on תמארות must refer to Ephraim, which is the only logical masculine singular antecedent to which it can refer; the point being that the glory or crown here is the glory of Ephraim, not of the drunkards or of the crown or of some other antecedent. To the present interpreter, it seems likely that Isaiah was again exercising his well established penchant for double entendre, employing a word that both meant “glory” but also evoked the idea of a crown.\(^{44}\) Thus, when Isaiah cried out against the “fading flower of his glorious beauty,” his original audience would have heard both the phrases “fading flower” and “glorious beauty” as ironic references to the King of Israel.


\(^{43}\) Ibid. Gilula cites an image of Reshef with such a deer ornament, in A General Introductory Guide to Egyptian Collections in the British Museum (London, 1964), fig. 42.

The one to come is described as הָוָה אַמָּה לֵאָרֹן who will come like a storm to trample the proud crown, who will pluck him like a ripe fruit. There is no doubt that Isaiah is thinking of the King of Assyria. Isaiah uses the imagery of a storm elsewhere to describe the King of Assyria (5:7–8; cf. 28:17–18):

Yahweh is raising up against them the waters of the mighty and powerful river, the king of Assyria and all his glory, he will rise up out of his channel and overflow his banks, he will sweep into Judah, he will flood and reach up to the neck; and his out-stretched wings will fill the breadth of your land, Immanuel.

Likewise, Isaiah uses the harvest imagery elsewhere to prophesy the destruction that Assyria will wreak upon the northern kingdom (17:4–6):

The glory of Jacob will be brought low [...] it will be like when one gathers standing grain, when his arm reaps the ear of grain; it will be like when one gleans ears of grain in the valley of Rephaim.

In chapter 28, Isaiah emphasizes that the "strong and courageous one" (the King of Assyria) will cast down the "proud crown of the drunkards of Ephraim." The removal of a crown from the head is a standard metaphor for destruction or disgrace (Lam 5:15; Job 19:9; Jer 13:18). Assyria is coming specifically to bring judgment to Israel.

The pairing of כֹּהֶן אֲבָנָא עִירָה is common in the Bible. Most often the roots occur together as verbal imperatives. The pair כֹּהֶן אֲבָנָא עִירָה is particularly associated with Joshua. Seven times Joshua is urged either by Moses or Yahweh to be "strong and courageous" (Deut 3:28; 31:7, 23; Josh 1:6, 7, 9, 18).

One time Moses exhorts the people to be "strong and courageous" in following Joshua (Deut 31:6). One time Joshua calls on the leaders of the people to be "strong and courageous" (Josh 10:25). It is striking that the language that Isaiah employs to portray the coming of the King of Assyria is the same as the formulaic language with which the tradition portrays Joshua — the leader of the holy war of conquest of Palestine.

It is not clear, of course, whether the language in Joshua 1 predates Isaiah 28. If one believes, as I do, that Isa 28:1–6 is an authentic Isaianic oracle and is to be dated to the time of the Syro-Ephraimitic crisis (ca. 734 B.C.E., more on this dating below), it is likely that the Isaiah passage predates the final form of Joshua 1. It is also possible, of course, that the language in Joshua 1 may preserve a tradition about Joshua that predates Isaiah, but this cannot be established with any certainty. But for the present

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45 Other occurrences of the dual imperative forms כֹּהֶן אֲבָנָא עִירָה are addressed to those who wait on Yahweh (Ps 27:14; 31:25), to King Solomon by his dying father (1 Chr 22:13; 28:20), to the people of Jerusalem by Hezekiah when Sennacherib is attacking (2 Chr 32:7).
point, it does not matter whether Joshua 1 or Isaiah 28 is older. The point is that just as the Bible presents the invasion that Joshua led as the work of Yahweh, using parallel language, Isaiah 28 presents the coming invasion of the king of Assyria as the Lord’s work. Yahweh will be fighting against Ephraim this time, not for her (cf. Isa 28:20 and the “strange work” of Yahweh). The imagery of the storm – “like a storm of hail, a destroying gale, like a storm of furious, scouring waters” – underscores how complete the coming destruction will be. The waters will destroy, overflow, cast down and trample. The harvest imagery – “like a first-ripe fig before the summer; the one who sees it, swallows it as soon as it is in his palm” – emphasizes the narrow timeframe within which Isaiah expected this to come about. (The first fruits that ripen on the first blooms. As a rule, fig trees blossomed twice a year and the major summer harvest came on the second blossom. The early figs that ripened on the first blossom were a delicacy that were quickly consumed.) Isaiah expected that the Assyrian invasion of Israel would be both swift and complete. This short timeline expectation supports the view that this oracle is to be dated to the Syro-Ephraimitic crisis of 734 B.C.E. (cf. the short timeline in Isa 7:14–16).

Many commentators take verses 5–6 to be an addition from a later hand. For example, Childs concludes, “Verses 5–6 are thus judged to be extremely late additions [...]” One reason for this viewpoint is that vv. 5–6 are introduced by בִּיהֶם הָדֹהַם, which links these verses with undoubtedly late passages such as Isa 4:2ff. (“On that day the branch of the Lord shall be beautiful and glorious [...]”). A second reason for the view that verses 5–6 are a later addition is that some commentators detect an “eschatological” theology in these verses, presumably in the promises that the Lord will be a crown for the remnant of his people (remnant understood here as the remnant that returns from the exile) and that the Lord will provide a spirit of justice. Yet neither of these conclusions is compelling. It is noteworthy that בְּיִמָּוָה is well attested Isaianic vocabulary (cf. 7:18, 20). Indeed, verses 5–6 are replete with common Isaianic terms, such as פָּרָת, מַעָרָת, and יְהוָה. Moreover, in the conclusion to the oracle in 28:5 several of the words used earlier are transformed into new formulations, a common Isaianic slight of hand and thus a signal that these verses are part of one composition – נְפִירָת עֲמָרָת נְעִירָת מַעָרָת נַעֲרָת נְפִירָת נְעִירָת, respectively. To repeat, this is good Isaianic style, as the adaptation of “root” and “Jesse” from 11:1 to 11:10 or the transformed sense of זָעִיר from 13:4 to 13:9 indicate. Furthermore the supposed detections of eschato-
logical theology prove unconvincing. The term “remnant” (גזרה) is not used here in an eschatological sense, but in a solidly attested Isaianic style (see below). Similarly, the phrase in 28:6 hardly need be understood as “eschatological,” as the parallel to the six-fold spirit of the ideal king in Isa 11:2 indicates – indeed, the spirit of remnant is mentioned in both passages. Likewise, the dual emphases of justice and warfare in 28:6 are typical of Isaiah (cf. 11:4, etc.). In the absence of more compelling evidence, it is best to assume that verses 1–6 were composed as a unit and should be interpreted as such.

The גזרה is a common Isaianic motif. But too often when גזרה occurs in Isaiah, interpreters understand the term as referring to the remnant of the Judean population who returned following the Babylonian Exile. The term is used more fluidly than that in Isaiah. In 10:20–23, Isaiah employs the term to announce that a “remnant of Israel […] will lean on the Lord […] a remnant will return, the remnant of Jacob, to the mighty God.” In this context “Israel” and “house of Jacob” refer specifically to the northern kingdom. The NRSV chooses to translate גזרה as an epithet for Yahweh; however, it should be noted that in 9:5 נבירה is one of the throne names of the Judean king, and thus the announcement that the remnant of Jacob would return to נבירה might be understood as a promise that the remnant would return to the Davidic monarchy. Considering Isaiah’s penchant for double entendre, it is likely that in 10:20–23, Isaiah is implying that the remnant from the north would return both to God and to the Davidic king. Similarly, it is also likely that the name of Isaiah’s son Shear (גזרה)-jashub (7:3) should be understood with a double meaning: as an oracle to Ahaz that only a remnant of the besieging Syro-Ephraimite armies would return to their home countries, and as an oracle that a remnant of the northern kingdom’s population would return to join the kingdom of Judah. Note that in 7:17 Isaiah promises Ahaz that “Yahweh will send upon you and your people and your father’s house days such as have not come since the days when Ephraim turned away from Judah.” The specific connection between the fortunes of Ahaz’ father’s house (the Davidic monarchy) and the split of the two kingdoms implies that Isaiah is announcing that a remnant of the north would return to Jerusalem and accept the Davidic monarchy.

Jan Ridderbos is surely correct when he writes that in 28:5 גזרה refers to “the ‘remnant’ of Samaria’s survivors and that as in Isa 10:20–23, Isaiah is announcing that a remnant of the northern people would return to Judah after the northern kingdom is destroyed.” But in light of the above passages, it is also probable that the גזרה in Isaiah 28 also carries the double sense that a remnant of the soon-to-be-defeated northern kingdom will

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return also and join with the Davidic monarchy. Isa 28:5 says that “the Lord of hosts will be a crown of glory and a diadem of splendor for the remnant of his people.”

The announcement that the Lord will be לארוסהםלאירששםלאירוסהם further supports this conclusion. This phrase need not be understood eschatologically, but as a reference to the Davidic king dwelling in Jerusalem. The phrases in 28:6 לארוסהםלאירוסהם and לארוסהםלאירוסהם are paralleled in Isaiah’s description of the ideal Davidic king. In Isa 11:2–4, Isaiah promises the ideal king will be marked by the הרה and will משמא (cf. Isa 32:1)⁴⁷ In light of this information, it seems best to understand these verses as announcing both that a remnant of the northern kingdom will return to fellowship with the Davidic monarchy (note that Isaiah 7:1–17, 10:20–23 and 28:1–6 show that Isaiah of Jerusalem believed that Ephraim’s return to God was bound up with the acceptance of the Davidic monarchy) and that the Lord would sustain Jerusalem’s Davidic king until that time.

One vital question to ask is, what audience can be imagined for this oracle and how would this oracle have functioned? Obviously Isaiah was not literally addressing the Ephraimite king in Samaria. There is no evidence that Isaiah ever ministered in the Northern Kingdom. On the other hand, Isaiah commonly couched his oracles as fictively addressed to foreign powers in order to address local concerns (cf. 14:3–21; 17:1–6; 19:1–15; etc.). The northern king here is only the fictive audience. So who is the actual audience? The actual audience that makes the best sense for this passage is the Davidic king of Judah. The royal language in 28:6 and the promise that the Ephraimite remnant will rejoin with the Davidic monarchy (if this interpretation is accurate) both support a royal audience for the oracle. The “one who sits in judgment at the gate” is likewise royal language. In 1 Sam 15:1ff., where Absalom is portrayed as turning the hearts of the people away from David, we see that the king was the one who sat in judgment over disputes. The people would bring their disputes to the king for justice. Absalom is said to have plotted against his father by saying, “If I were set as the one judging in the land, everyone who had a dispute could bring it to me and I would grant him justice” (v. 4). Likewise, when 1 Sam 8 tells the story of how the elders of the people first asked for a king, we are told that they asked “for a king to judge [NRSV: govern] us” (v. 5, English: 6). The king was the one who sat to judge the land. Thus when Isaiah promises that Yahweh will be a “spirit of justice for the one who sits in judgment,” this is a promise for and about the king. Likewise, the promise that the Lord will be a spirit of “might for those who turn back battle at the gate” (28:6b)

⁴⁷ Note that the dual emphases of justice and warfare in 28:6 are also typical of Isaiah (cf. 11:4, etc.).
reflects both the royal responsibility to lead in war and also employs the Isaianic royal vocabulary מֶשֶׁרְוָה. The occurrence of the masculine plural participle מָשְׁרְוָו need not imply a plural audience, because the poetic balance of singular מָשְׁרָה and plural מָשְׁרְוָו is common poetic style, as Isa 32:1 indicates: “See, a king will reign in righteousness, and princes will rule with justice.”

5. Translation and Explanation

This study of Isa 28:1–6 has argued that the passage should be understood as an authentic oracle of Isaiah of Jerusalem, dating to the time of the Syro-Ephraimite crises. Further, it has been argued that our understanding of the passage can be fruitfully informed by iconography. The passage is a seamless unit. It may be translated as follows:

1 Ah! O Proud Crown of the drunkards of Ephraim, O Fading Flower of its glorious beauty! Who is upon the head of a valley of rich foods, of those overcome with wine!

2 A strong and mighty one from the Lord is about to come, Like a storm of hail, a destroying gale, Like a storm of furious, scouring waters; He will hurl them to the earth with his hand.

1 Trampled underfoot will be The Proud Crown of the drunkards of Ephraim.

4 The Fading Flower of its glorious beauty, Who is upon the head of a valley of rich foods, Will be like a first-ripe fig before the summer; the one who sees it, swallows it as soon as it is in his palm!

3 On that day, the Lord of hosts will be A crown of glory and a glorious diadem for the remnant of his people,

6 A spirit of justice for the one who sits in judgment, And of might for those who turn back battle at the gate.

The oracle in Isa 28:1–6 was fictively addressed by Isaiah of Jerusalem to the King of Israel, but the real intended audience of the oracle was the King of Judah. Although many commentators misidentify the passage as an “oracle of woe,” the passage is in fact an oracle of salvation, with a content similar to Isa 7:1–17. Set at the time of the Syro-Ephraimite crisis (ca. 735–

48 It is inaccurate to label the passage is a “woe oracle,” as so many scholars do. The Hebrew יהוה does not properly mean “woe,” as the occurrences in 1 Kgs 13:30; Isa 1:24; and especially Isa 55:1 (“Ah! All who thirst, come for water! You that have no money, come, purchase and eat!”) indicate. The term is a neutral attention-getting exclamation, such as “Yo!” or “Hey!” are today.

49 The particle יהוה does not mean “see,” but rather indicates imminent action.
732 B.C.E.), during which Israel and Aram attacked Judah and plotted to depose Ahaz and force Judah to join them in rebellion against Assyria (cf. Isa 7:1ff.), the oracle promises that the invading King of Israel would be destroyed by the arrival of the King of Assyria. Further, the oracle promises that a remnant of Ephraim would both return to God and accept the Davidic monarchy. Finally, the oracle promises that Yahweh would be with the King of Judah to uphold him in his royal tasks of sitting in judgment and leading in battle. Just as Isa 7:1–17 contains an oracle of salvation in which Isaiah assures King Ahaz that the attacking kings’ plans will not come to pass (7:7–9), Isa 28:1–6 should be understood as a stylized oracle of assurance spoken to the King of Judah during the same crisis. Isaiah refers to the invading king as the “proud crown” and “fading flower” of Ephraim, playing on the flower as both a symbol of royalty but also as a symbol of transitoriness. The message being that the momentary invasion would wither like a flower in the heat of day. In this oracle the destruction of the invading king is foretold in order to reassure the local king. Thus the kings in question in Isa 28:1–6 are King Pekah of Israel (the proud crown/fading flower), King Tiglath-Pileser III of Assyria (the Lord’s strong and courageous one) and King Ahaz of Judah (the one who sits in judgment and turns back battle at the gate).
Fig. 1: Detail of the Blue Crown, based on relief from the temple of Seti I at Abydos in Egypt (ca. 1317–1301 B.C.E.). Line drawing reproduced by Hildi Keel-Leu in Othmar Keel, *The Symbolism of the Biblical World: Ancient Near Eastern Iconography and the Book of Psalms* (Winona Lake, Ind., 1997), 278.


Fig. 3: Detail of King Hammurapi’s head, based on a relief atop his famous basalt stele on display in the Musée du Louvre (ca. 1792–1750 B.C.E.). Line drawing reproduced from Henri Frankfort, *The Art of the Ancient Orient* (Baltimore, 1955), plate 65.
Fig. 4: Detail of the Assyrian king Assurnasirpal II’s head, based on a series of reliefs discovered at Nimrud (883–859 B.C.E.). Line drawing reproduced from J.E. Curtis and J.E Reade (ed.), *Art and Empire: Treasures from Assyria in the British Museum* (London, 1995), 54.

Fig. 5: Representation of Sargon II’s head, based on a relief taken from his palace at Khorsabad (721–705 B.C.E.). Line drawing reproduced from James Pritchard, *The Ancient Near East in Pictures* (Princeton, N.J., 1954), plate 446.
Fig. 6: Detail of a rosette adorned crown, based on a limestone statue of a king excavated from Malatya, in northern Syria (ninth century B.C.E.). Line drawing reproduced from Jane M. Cahill “Royal Rosettes Fit For a King,” *BAR* (September/October 1997): 48–57, 68–69.

Fig. 7: Rosette adorned crown, based on a bust of a presumed Ammonite king (ninth-eighth centuries B.C.E.). Line drawing reproduced from Jane M. Cahill “Royal Rosettes Fit For a King,” *BAR* (September/October 1997): 48–57, 68–69.
Fig. 8: Representation of the Assyrian king Assurnasirpal II’s rosette covered crown and robe, based on a relief from Nimrud (883–859 B.C.E.). Line drawing reproduced from Jane M. Cahill “Royal Rosettes Fit For a King,” BAR (September/October 1997): 48–57, 68–69.

Fig. 9: Detail of a wine jar stamped with a rosette emblem, uncovered by Yigal Shiloh’s directed excavations of “Area G” in the City of David (1978–85). The fragment dates to the late seventh or early sixth century B.C.E. After Jane M. Cahill “Royal Rosettes Fit For a King,” BAR (September/October 1997): 48–57, 68–69.