

# **The Book of Isaiah**

by

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## Preface

The writings of Isaiah are quite possibly the best known among the prophets of Israel due to the many messianic quotations and allusions in the New Testament. During Advent, the "voice in the desert," fulfilled in the mission of John the Baptizer, commences the calendar for every Christian year. Each Christmas season, the Christian community sings the carols, reads the nativity verses and hears the haunting words in Handel's Messiah, "Comfort, comfort, my people..." Phrases like "The virgin shall conceive," and "For unto us a child is born," are so familiar that one hardly pauses to remember that were written nearly eight centuries before the birth of Jesus. The mission of Jesus, God's Son, is anticipated in such familiar lines as, "See, I lay in Zion, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone for a sure foundation; the one who trusts will never be dismayed." The message of salvation rings like a hammer, "How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news," and "Come, let us reason together...though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow." The invitation is clear, "Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat...without money and without cost." The songs of the suffering servant of the Lord who was "wounded for our transgression" and who was "numbered with the transgressors, for he bore the sin of many" resound with the triumph of redemption. Other themes, also, are rich in scope as they anticipate the consummation of history when, "The earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea," and the nations "will beat their swords into plowshares," a time when evil "will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain."

These redemptive, messianic themes are justly famous, for they lie at the core of Christian faith. However, the Book of Isaiah is far more than a collection of predictions about the coming of the Messiah. In fact, the vision of a future for God's people lies firmly rooted in the vicissitudes of history as Judah played out her national history among the nations of the ancient Near East. Central to this history was the tragedy of exile, and it must be firmly acknowledged that the exile was the

ground in which the messianic hope first took root. So, the scope of the Book of Isaiah is wide indeed. The book interacts with and anticipates three great empire-builders, the Assyrians in the Isaiah's own time, the Babylonians yet to come, and beyond that, the Persians who would play a key role in restoring Judah to her lands after the exile. In both poetry and prose, Isaiah challenges the sins of his nation, pronounces the imminence of coming judgment, and looks ahead to restoration and salvation after judgment. The nations of the world are not omitted either, for the message of judgment and salvation is for them as well. This, then, is the scope of the Book of Isaiah which, in the canons of the Hebrew, Septuagint and English Bibles, occupies first place among the writing prophets.

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## Isaiah of Jerusalem (Isaiah 1-39)

The eighth century before Christ saw the rise of a new tradition in the history of Israel--the writing prophets. Previously, there were seers and prophets of immense spiritual stature, such as, Samuel, Nathan, Gad, and Elijah, but with the eighth century prophets, the oracles not only were spoken but were written down and preserved for posterity. Of the eighth century prophets, Isaiah of Jerusalem produced the largest volume of such oracles during the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah of Judah.

Chapters 1-39 of the Book of Isaiah comprise the portion of the book that is most closely connected to the national history of Judah prior to the exile. (Chapters 40-66 are addressed to the Babylonian exiles after the fall of Jerusalem.) The material is written in both poetry and prose, and one lengthy prose section, chapters 36-39, is a near duplication of 2 Kings 18-20. Altogether, chapters 1-39 contain oracles to both Jerusalem and Judah in the midst of their political struggles with Assyria as well as oracles concerning the surrounding nations and wonderful themes concerning God's ultimate purposes in history.

### **Introduction**

#### **The Politics of Judah**

The opening of the book places the ministry of Isaiah during the reigns of four of Judah's kings, Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah. The previous century had been turbulent. A century earlier, Jehoshaphat of Judah had instituted religious reforms (2 Kg. 22:41-46; 2 Chr. 17:3-9; 19:4-11), put the surrounding Canaanite nations to tribute (2 Chr. 17:10-13; 20), and even ventured in international sea trade, though the venture failed due to a sea disaster (1 Kg. 22:48; 2 Chr. 20:35-37). Jehoram, his son, was decidedly weaker. He began his rulership with a bloody purge (2 Chr. 21:4), and married the daughter of Ahab and Jezebel (2 Kg. 8:18). During his reign, the Edomites were able to shed their vassal ties with Judah (2 Kg. 8:20-22), which in turn meant the loss of the Ezion-geber fortress and possibly the mines of the Arabah.<sup>1</sup> Ahaziah, Jehoram's son, was executed by Jehu when Jehu wiped out the Omride family in the north (2 Kg. 9:24-29; 2 Chr. 22:7-9). In the power vacuum which followed, Athaliah, the daughter of Jezebel, seized the throne in Jerusalem, destroying the entire royal family in order to preserve her advantage. Only a single child, carefully hidden in the temple precincts, managed to escape Athaliah's rage (2 Kg. 11:1-3; 2 Chr. 22:10-12). This child, Joash, was installed as the new king when he was only seven years old, while Athaliah was executed.

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<sup>1</sup>J. Bright, *A History of Israel*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1972) 244-245.

Though Joash began well under the tutelage of Jehoiada, the priest, his political power weakened in his later years. At first, he seemed fully committed to religious reform, but later, he took funds from the temple treasury to buy respite from Hazael of Syria (2 Kg. 12). Severely wounded in a conflict with Hazael, Joash was murdered in his bed by his own officials (2 Chr. 24:23-25). His son, Amaziah, did not improve the nation's fortunes, and after a disastrous attempt to fight against Israel in the north, he was finally assassinated by members of his own court (2 Kg. 14:19-20; 2 Chr. 25:27-28).

This century of political failure stands in sharp contrast to the relatively stable reign of Uzziah,<sup>2</sup> the first of the kings during Isaiah's ministry. If the previously century had been chaotic and fragmented, the fifty-two year reign of Uzziah must have seemed like a golden age. Though only sixteen when he ascended to the throne (and at that time probably co-regent with his father), Uzziah quickly distinguished himself. Though the biblical historian does not give him full commendation, he was better than most, strengthening Judah's borders (2 Chr. 26:6-9), building cisterns and improving farming and animal husbandry (2 Chr. 26:10). He further developed the army (2 Chr. 26:11-15) and extended his trade influence deep into the southern desert near the Gulf of Aqabah (2 Kg. 14:22; 2 Chr. 26:2). We may extrapolate from the brief references about his rebuilding of Elath that he controlled the trade routes to Arabia, Egypt and other African countries. Though his latter years were lived out in seclusion due to his contraction of leprosy as a divine judgment for usurping priestly functions (2 Kg. 15:5; 2 Chr. 26:16-21), and though presumably in these later years he ruled as co-regent with his son, his legacy to Judah was rich. It is within this stable political circumstance that the young Isaiah received his call to prophethood.

The relative security established by Uzziah was not without threat. Though at first largely unnoticed by the small nations in the Levant, a formidable superpower was rising in the northeast. Tiglath-Pileser of Assyria had turned his eyes upon the treasures of Egypt, and the kingdoms of Israel and Judah lay directly in his path. The rise of Assyria as much as the petty politics of Canaan become the backdrop for the oracles of Isaiah.

### **Isaiah ben Amoz**

Other than his father's name (Is. 1:1),<sup>3</sup> we know nothing of the ancestry of Isaiah. It has long been conjectured that he was of royal descent, and Jewish

<sup>2</sup>Uzziah is the same person as Azariah. In the Hebrew text, there is only a single consonantal difference between the two names, and the double names may be accounted for by the suggestion that one is a throne name and the other a personal name, cf. H. MacLean, *IDB* (1962) 4.742.

<sup>3</sup>Amoz is not to be confused with the prophet Amos; the Hebrew spelling of each is distinct.

tradition has it that he was a cousin of Uzziah himself, but the accuracy of this information is uncertain. He was married, and his wife was prophetically gifted, also (Is. 8:3). By this marriage, Isaiah fathered at least two sons,<sup>4</sup> each peculiarly named so that they were living symbols of important prophetic themes (7:3; 8:3). The one was named *Shear-Yashuv* (= A Remnant Returns), and the other *Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz* (= Speed-Plunder-Haste-Booty). Isaiah seems to have lived exclusively in Jerusalem, and his oracles have many urban metaphors, though he drew upon images of rural life as well.

If we take his call to be in 740 B.C., the year of Uzziah's death (Is. 6:1), then his ministry lasted over four decades. The last we hear of him is on the occasion of Sennacherib's threat against Jerusalem in 701 B.C. (Is. 36-37). The tradition regarding his martyrdom is preserved in the pseudepigraphical *Ascension of Isaiah*, which indicates that because he would not retract his oracles, Manasseh executed him by having him sawed in half with a wood saw. It may be that Hebrews 11:37 reflects upon this tradition. The tradition was well-respected by the early Christians Justin Martyr and Tertullian, and it appears in the Jewish Talmud as well.

## **Authorship and Composition**

Critical scholars have divided the Book of Isaiah into two (sometimes three) major sections. The first, Isaiah 1-39, generally is credited to Isaiah of Jerusalem, while the second, Isaiah 40-66, is credited to an unnamed prophet (or prophets) in the Babylonian exile. Critical questions regarding so-called Second Isaiah will be taken up at the beginning of Isaiah 40-66. Most scholars, critical or otherwise, agree in locating the oracles of chapters 1-39 in Jerusalem in the 8th century B.C.

## **Canon and Text**

The canonical order of the Hebrew Bible is different than the English Bible, which follows the Greek Septuagint. In the Hebrew canon, the Book of Isaiah is the first scroll of the Latter Prophets comprised of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and the Twelve. The Hebrew text of Isaiah has been preserved very well, both by the Massoretes as well as in the Qumran scrolls, the latter which contain both a complete edition and a fragmentary one.

## **Structure**

Most Old Testament prophetic books are anthologies, since their contents often depart from chronological order. Chapters 1-39 of Isaiah are no exception. However, to say that the book is a collection of sermons and oracles does not mean

<sup>4</sup>For the possibility of another son, see discussion at 7:10-25.

that it is haphazard, and in fact, it is generally agreed that some of the earlier chapters (1-11) come from Isaiah's early ministry while some of the later ones (28-32) come from his later ministry. Still, the groupings of the various sections of the work seem to have been along thematic lines rather than chronological ones. Whether such groupings were arranged by the prophet himself or others following him is unknown.

- ♦ Is. 1-12      Isaiah's Memoirs
- ♦ Is. 13-23      Oracles to the nations
- ♦ Is. 24-27      The Apocalypse of Isaiah
- ♦ Is. 28-33      Two Kingdoms Under Judgment
- ♦ Is. 34-35      The Little Apocalypse
- ♦ Is. 36-39      Historical Postscript

### **Isaiah's Memoirs (Isaiah 1-12)**

Given that the Book of Isaiah is an anthology, it is appropriate to rearrange some elements along chronological lines. Hence, Isaiah's call to prophethood first, even though it does not appear until somewhat later in the book, will be treated here. It is generally agreed that chapters 1-12 belong to Isaiah's early ministry, and due to their biographical features of superscriptions (1:1; 2:1) and first person narratives (6:1ff.; 8:1ff.), scholars have given them the title "Isaiah's Memoirs."

### **The Call of Isaiah (Isaiah 6)**

The account of Isaiah's call is one of the classic passages in prophetic literature. If others pose the question, "Do you listen in on God's council?" (Job 15:8; Je. 23:18, 22; cf. 1 Kg. 22:19ff.), Isaiah's vision and call describe his privileged position as a true prophet who has stood in the council of the exalted God. The setting for his vision seems to be a deliberate ambiguity which interplays between the earthly temple of Solomon on Mt. Zion and the heavenly temple where God's enthronement is surrounded by the angelic hosts. Interpreters sometimes debate whether the word "temple" (6:1, 4) refers to the earthly shrine or a heavenly counterpart, but if the ambiguity is deliberate, the question is irrelevant.

The vision occurred in the year of Uzziah's death (6:1).<sup>5</sup> It is likely that Isaiah had been born during the long tenure of this king and had never faced such a

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<sup>5</sup>There is considerable technical discussion concerning the year of Uzziah's death as well as the general dates given for the kings of Israel and Judah. Tentatively, we have followed the chronology of Thiele that Uzziah died in 740 B.C., cf. E. Thiele, *A Chronology of the Hebrew Kings* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1977) 41-48, 52-64.

political transition. The uncertainty about Judah's political future sharpened the effect of his vision that the true King was none other than Yahweh himself, for as the young prophet said, "My eyes have seen the King, Yahweh Tsabaoth" (6:5)!

The setting for the vision contains all the elements of temple worship. At the center was the enthroned Lord, just as in the earthly temple the Ark of the Testimony, with its sheltering cherubs, was the earthly throne of Yahweh (cf. 1 Sa. 4:4; 2 Sa. 6:2; 2 Kg. 19:15; 1 Chr. 13:6).<sup>6</sup> The six-winged seraphs<sup>7</sup> shielded their faces from the blinding glory of Yahweh with one pair of wings, hid their nakedness from his holiness with a second pair of wings, and flew to their heavenly tasks with a third pair of wings. Their antiphonal singing (6:2-3), the heavy smoke of incense (6:4), and the altar with its red-hot stones (6:6) all recall the ceremony of Solomon's temple. The scene anticipates the same sort of heavenly liturgy to be described eight centuries later in the Apocalypse of John. The threefold praise, "Holy, holy, holy," has long been believed to be an Old Testament anticipation of the New Testament's revelation of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, though, of course, Isaiah could not have known that. What was most impressive for Isaiah, now that Uzziah was dead, was the heavenly kingship of Yahweh whose glory filled the whole earth (6:3b). In the presence of such holiness, Isaiah was stricken with a deep sense of his own sinfulness and the guilt of his native people (6:5). Quickly, he was shown that holiness could be imputed by an atoning act of heaven (6:6-7).

Now privileged to stand within the heavenly council, Isaiah overhears the deliberations taking place and the question about who could be sent as a messenger to the people (6:8a). He immediately offered himself, and was commissioned as a prophet (6:8b-9a). The terms of his commission were less than attractive, however, for he was warned in advance that his message to the people would be received in a strange mixture of hearing without understanding and seeing without perception. His sermons would only result in calloused hearts, dull ears and closed eyes (6:9b-10). The cause of this hardening is difficult to pinpoint. The imperatives in the Hebrew text suggest that it was a sovereign hardening of the people's heart, much as Yahweh once hardened Pharaoh's heart. The Septuagint, however, does not employ the imperative mood, but renders it, "You will indeed hear, but you will not understand; you will indeed see, but you will not perceive" (LXX, my translation).

<sup>6</sup>The NIV properly translates the Hebrew participle *yoshev* (= sitting, dwelling) as an enthronement, cf., M. Gorg, *TDOT* (1990) VI.430-438.

<sup>7</sup>Seraphs are mentioned only here in the Bible, but they seem to be a high order of angelic creatures similar to the cherubs described by Ezekiel (cf. Eze. 1, 10). Their name is derived from the Hebrew verb "to burn," hence "the burning ones." Because the term seraph also is used to describe the fiery serpents of the wilderness (cf. Nu. 21:6; Dt. 8:15), and because later Isaiah uses the same term to refer to snakes (cf. 14:29; 30:6), some interpreters suggest that either their appearance was like snakes or else they carried snakes in their hands. A relief discovered at Tell Halaf depicts an other-worldly figure holding a snake in each hand, cf. T. Gaster, *IDB* (1962) 1.132.

All three synoptic gospels quote this passage, and their quotations follow the sense of the Septuagint (Mt. 13:14-15//Mk. 4:10-12//Lk. 8:10). The Fourth Gospel, on the other hand, quotes the passage but follows the imperative sense of the Hebrew text (Jn. 12:39-41). As such, the hardening of human hearts is at once attributed to God as well as to the stubbornness of the people themselves. Jesus' comment is well taken: "Whoever has will be given more; whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him" (Mt. 13:12//Mk. 4:25//Lk. 8:18; 19:26).

Isaiah's response to this dismal calling was a horrified, "How long?" Would his entire ministry be doomed to failure before it even began? Apparently so! Isaiah's blinding message would be effective until the entire land of Judah was wasted, the people exiled, and the kingdom had become like a stump after the loggers had cut down the whole forest. The survivors, though only a tenth, would suffer yet more judgment. However, as the future preaching of Isaiah would make clear, the "stump" of the holy seed would not die altogether (cf. 11:1).

### **Summary of Isaiah's Oracles (Isaiah 1)**

Many scholars recognize that the first chapter in the Book of Isaiah serves as a summary his entire ministry. Such a conclusion is reinforced by the double superscription (1:1; 2:1), thus distinguishing chapter 1 from what follows. Some have even suggested that it is a composite of various oracles, though this theory lacks compelling evidence. Nevertheless, it is probably sound to view the first chapter as a preview and summary of Isaiah's preaching.

The oracle begins in the context of Yahweh's covenant with Jerusalem and Judah. The heavens and the earth were the original witnesses to God's covenant with his people (cf. Dt. 32:1), and now they are called upon to testify to her covenant-breaking behavior (1:2a). Like Hosea, his contemporary to the north (cf. Ho. 11:1ff.; cf. Ex. 4:22-23), Isaiah employs the metaphor of Yahweh as a Father whose children had rebelled against him (1:2b). As a people, they did not even have the sense of domestic animals, who at least knew their way home (1:3). In the midst of such flagrant sins, it seemed useless for the Divine Father to continue punishing his wayward son, who, after repeated judgments by the surrounding nations and the ravages of natural disaster, already was nothing more than a collection of welts and sores (1:4-6). Of course, such judgments in history were precisely what the Deuteronomic code prescribed if the nation broke covenant (cf. Dt. 28:15-68), and now the people had reaped what they had sown.

Anticipating the ravages of the Assyrian scourge, Isaiah describes Judah as desolate, her cities torched, the fields stripped, and the Daughter of Zion<sup>8</sup> exposed

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<sup>8</sup>In Hebrew poetry, the term "daughter" often refers to some kind of settlement or village, cf. I. Hopkins, "The 'Daughters of Judah' Are Really Rural Satellites of an Urban Center," *BAR* (Sept/Oct 1980) 44-45. Here, the term

like a shack in a vineyard or a hut in a field of melons (1:7-8). Changing from the second person to the first person, Isaiah now identifies himself with the people under judgment (1:9). Apart from God's mercy, no survivors would have been left, just as there were no survivors in the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (cf. Ge. 19:23-24). However, as severe as would be God's judgment upon Judah and Jerusalem, a remnant would be left. Like the imagery of the "stump," the imagery of a "remnant" provides future hope in the preaching of Isaiah.

Still, in many ways the ruling class in Jerusalem was like Sodom and Gomorrah, parading their sins without remorse (1:10). Similar to Jeremiah in his temple sermon (cf. Je. 7), Isaiah delivered a scathing rebuke to those who participated in temple worship but whose hearts were far from the righteousness of the covenant God. Religious ritual without relationship to God was meaningless (1:11-15). What God wanted from his people was righteousness, not the trappings of religion (1:16-17). True righteousness was to be expressed as concern for the helpless, those who were particularly hard-pressed by the upper classes.

Now follows four conditional sentences. It is unclear whether the first two should be questions or affirmations, though most translations render them as affirmations (1:18).<sup>9</sup> If questions, they are rhetorical with the expected answer, "No!" In either case, the consequence is clear: if the people are to receive the covenant blessings, they must keep the covenant requirements. Rebellion will yield nothing but the sword of judgment (1:19-20). The covenant warnings notwithstanding, the citizens of Jerusalem and Judah were plunging ever deeper into dissipation, and the ruling class was leading the way (1:21-23). Since God's enemies were his own people (1:24), he had determined to ease the burden of their iniquities by purging them of their sins (1:25). He would restore just judges as in ancient times, a reference to leaders such as the elders in the desert (Ex. 18:17-26), Deborah (Jg. 4:4-5) and Samuel (1 Sa. 7:15-17). After this purge, Jerusalem would be reclaimed with justice. The returning remnant would be saved, but covenant-breakers would perish (1:27-28).<sup>10</sup>

Finally, because of the coming divine purge, false worship would cease. The sacred oaks and gardens, which were open air cultic sites for the Canaanite fertility rituals,<sup>11</sup> would be cause for shame and disgrace (1:29). The oak and the garden, the very symbols of Canaanite religion, would become symbols of the nation's apostasy.

Daughter of Zion probably refers to the entire city of Jerusalem, not merely those living on the Hill of Ophel.

<sup>9</sup>The suggestion that the metaphor of whiteness and wool refers to deepening infection must be discarded, since it breaks the parallelism of the third and fourth sentence.

<sup>10</sup>The NIV uses the expression "penitent ones," but it should be noted that the word is part of the Isaianic word group which means "returning ones," hence, the penitent remnant.

<sup>11</sup>J. Watts, *Isaiah 1-33 [WBC]* (Waco, TX: Word, 1985) 25; P. Craigie and G. Wilson, *ISBE* (1988) 4.98.

Both the follower of such religion and his work would be consumed in the fire of God's judgment (1:30-31).

## The Last Days (2)

The preface directs this oracle toward Judah and Jerusalem (2:1). The oracle is punctuated with references to a future time variously called "the last days" (2:2), "in that day" (2:11b, 17b, 20a), and the prediction that "Yahweh Tsabaoth has a day" (2:12a). All interpreters generally agree that Isaiah refers to the same thing as his northern contemporary, Amos, who predicted the "Day of Yahweh" (Am. 5:18; 2:16; 3:14). As Amos makes clear, there was already an existing concept of the Day of Yahweh as a time of blessing, prosperity, hope and light. In the popular mind, it was viewed as the moment of Yahweh's victory over his enemies, culminating in the supremacy of Israel. For the eighth century prophets, however, the Day of Yahweh was much more than that! It was a reckoning, a time of God's devastating judgment. To be sure, the Day of Yahweh would include the exaltation of Mt. Zion and Yahweh's temple (2:2-5). Zion would become the center of worship for the nations of the world (2:2), and the teaching of the Torah would be widely known (2:3). God would establish an era of international peace, and war would cease (2:4). In view of this coming golden age, the people of God were advised to live their present lives in light of this glorious future (2:5).

However, the people of Israel were not walking in the light of the Lord. Far from serving God wholeheartedly, they deserved his abandonment because of their flagrant sins (2:6a). They had adopted the paganizing religious practices of Mesopotamia, Philistia and the other Canaanite nations that surrounded them (2:6b). Though they still reveled in the prosperity of Uzziah's long and stable reign (2:7), as their wealth multiplied, so did their false gods (2:8). Thus, when the day of reckoning came, it would be directed not merely against the pagans, but also against the covenant-breakers who were God's own people. The situation was beyond forgiveness (2:9).

Thus, the Day of Yahweh would be a devastating judgment. Three times Isaiah repeats the phase that in dread of God's righteous anger, people would run to the caves (2:10, 19, 21). God would shake the earth in judgment, and the arrogant law-breakers would get their just deserts (2:11-17a). Then the false religion of the pagans would be discarded as garbage (2:20), and only Yahweh would be acknowledged (2:17b). God's people must change their values--they must stop trusting in their human resources (2:22) and walk in the way of Yahweh (2:5).

When would doomsday arrive? The expressions "Day of Yahweh" and "that day" seem intentionally ambiguous. In the near future, such warnings must certainly have referred to the coming devastation from the Mesopotamia empire-builders,

Assyria and Babylon. In a longer view, the Apocalypse of John alludes to some of these very passages in predicting a doomsday much later than the eighth and seventh centuries B.C. (cf. Rv. 6:15-17).

### **Doomsday for Jerusalem and Judah (3:1--4:1)**

It was popular to believe that the people of Jerusalem and Judah were safe from the judgment of God, because they were God's chosen people. More to the point, the southern nation had remained faithful to the dynasty of David. While the northern nation had abandoned David's family, the covenant of David, and Solomon's temple on Mt. Zion, Judah never wavered in her faithfulness to all three. The psalms witness to this false sense of security, for the popular belief was that Jerusalem and Zion were eternally secure (Ps. 46:1-7; 125:1-2), and this security was rooted firmly in the covenant God made with David (Ps. 132:11-18). When Micah, Isaiah's contemporary, preached that disaster was coming, his message was flatly rejected as a heresy (Mi. 2:6-7; cf. 3:11b).

The popular viewpoint notwithstanding, Isaiah added his support that Jerusalem and Judah were under dire threat. Looming in the future was a disintegration of society, including an economic collapse (3:1) and the failure of societal infrastructure (3:2-7). All sense of national direction would break down leaving the nation on the brink of anarchy. It was the common Assyrian practice to deport the leading citizens and administrators of a conquered state, leaving the survivors in desperation for stable leadership. Jerusalem and Judah were well along the road to such devastation, reeling like a drunkard (3:8a) while they brazenly defied God with their sins (3:8b-9).

Though there was some hope for those who lived righteously (3:10), those who did not were doomed (3:11-12).<sup>12</sup> God, the divine prosecutor, would summon the leaders of the nation to court to bring suit against them (3:13-15). Isaiah echoes the rebukes of Amos in the north that the rich and powerful had exacted a crushing tribute from the poor in the land (cf. Am. 2:6-8). Magistrates were in cahoots with thieves, taking bribes and kick-backs (cf. 1:23; 5:23; 10:1-2; Mi. 3:1-3, 9-11a; 7:3), and land speculators were pushing the small-holdings farmer from the very source of his livelihood (5:8; Mi. 2:1-2; 7:2).<sup>13</sup> Money was more important than honesty (cf. Mi. 6:10-12). The wives of the rich and powerful demanded more and more (3:16; cf. Am. 4:1). The day of reckoning was at hand! The finery of the rich

<sup>12</sup>There is a textual difficulty in 3:12. The NIV (so also KJV, NASB, RSV, NAB) follows the general sense of the Masoretic Text, where the administration is depicted as weak and effeminate (a bunch of kids and women). The NEB follows the LXX and the Targums, reading, "Money-lenders strip my people bare, and usurers lord it over them."

<sup>13</sup>For a more complete discussion of all these passages and their implications, see J. Dearman, *Property Rights in the Eighth-Century Prophets* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1988) 18-57.

society women would be snatched away (3:18-22), and in its place would be filthiness, disease and humiliation (3:17, 24). The young soldiers would die, and Zion would be left like a widow, destitute and alone (3:25-26). The loss of life on the battlefield would be so extensive that the women would welcome polygamy as a justifiable measure to prevent the extinction of their families (4:1).

### **The Branch (4:2-6)**

Now the oracle shifts back to the promise of hope for the future. This pattern of prediction--first judgment, then restoration--is characteristic of the whole book, and indeed, of all the writing prophets. The expression "the Day of Yahweh" and its various parallels has a paradoxical range. On the one hand, it can refer to doomsday and God's judgment on the nations, while on the other it can refer to the blessing of final righteousness and full restoration. Furthermore, the language of "the last days" has a certain semantic range with respect to time. It can refer to imminent historical disasters in history, such as the coming invasions of the Mesopotamian empire-builders, and it can also refer to the indeterminate future far beyond the events of the eighth century. Thus, Isaiah can say "in that day" the arrogance of man will be brought low (2:17) and at the same time say "the fruit of the land will be the pride and glory of the survivors in Israel" (4:2). Both images, judgment and blessing, belong to the Day of Yahweh.

The imagery of "the Branch" is important (4:2). It stands in sharp contrast to the imagery of "the stump" (6:13; 11:1). If the stump is a metaphor for the disaster and the survivors who remain, the branch is a metaphor for the restoration and blessing of this remnant after the disaster has past.<sup>14</sup> The survivors will be purified by "a Spirit of fire" (4:3-4; cf. 1:18, 25, 27), an image that centuries later may have been the background behind the message of John the Baptist, "He (the Coming One) will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire" (cf. Mt. 3:11-12). In this restoration, the presence of the Lord in the daily cloud and nightly fire, as in the exodus (Ex. 13:21-22; 14:19-20; Dt. 1:33; Ps. 78:14), would hover over the people as a protective canopy of glory (4:5-6).

### **The Song of the Vineyard (5)**

Chapter 5 has the fascinating superscription, "I will sing to my friend a song about his vineyard" (5:1a). It has been suggested that this song was an intentional takeoff from the popular ballads sung at the Fall vintage festival.<sup>15</sup> While the title

<sup>14</sup>It should be noted that the expression "the Branch" becomes a technical term for the messiah figure, not only in Isaiah (cf. 11:1ff.) but also in Jeremiah (cf. 23:5; 33:15) and Zechariah (cf. 3:8; 6:12). The messiah will be the epitome of the remnant.

<sup>15</sup>B. Anderson, *Understanding the Old Testament*, 2nd ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1966) 268.

might suggest that this is to be a love song,<sup>16</sup> the rhythm of the song's first line sets a very different tone, for it is a dirge rhythm.<sup>17</sup> The singer's friend had a vineyard in a fertile, hillside position, excellently situated for maximum sunshine (5:1b). He cultivated the topsoil and removed the rocks, the latter which he used to build a protective tower and wall. In anticipation of his harvest, he excavated a wine vat. In spite of his efforts, the vineyard, far from producing the "bright-reds" which he expected, produced only the small, hard sour grapes that were useless for wine-making (5:2).<sup>18</sup> Now the voice is that of the vineyard's owner, and he asks what has gone wrong. What more could he have done (5:3-4)? So, he announces his intention to destroy the fruitless vineyard, breaking down its wall and allowing it to lie fallow until it is overtaken with briars and wild undergrowth (5:5-6). Then, the singer drives the message home into his listeners' hearts: the vineyard is the people of Israel and Judah, and the owner is Yahweh himself. He looked for good fruit, but found only barrenness (5:7). The song climaxes with a powerful poetic play on words:

*He looked for justice (*mishpat*)  
but saw bloodshed (*mispah*)  
for righteousness (*tsedeqah*)  
but heard cries of distress (*tse'aqah*).*

The oracle which follows the song of the vineyard pronounces doom in six woes on the nation for its covenant-breaking ways.<sup>19</sup> The first woe is against the land-grabbing greed of the wealthy (5:8). Land in Israel was not to be permanently sold but was to remain within the family (cf. Nu. 27:8-11). Land-grabbing and speculation were strictly forbidden. Due to economic distress, a land-owner might put his property out to land contract, but all land contracts were to terminate every fifty years (Lv. 25:13-17, 23-28). God's judgment on land monopolies would be severe drought (5:9-10). The second woe condemns the party-atmosphere of the rich--their carousing, drunkenness, and entertainment. They did all this while ignoring God and his ways, and because of their decadence, they were headed for exile, starvation and death (5:11-17). The third woe uses the image of a burden-bearer, the slave who pulls long hours at the ropes which draw heavy loads. In this case, the heavy load is the sin of defiance which demands that God hurry up and

<sup>16</sup>The song is addressed to a male, but whether the singer is female (as in a bride) or male (as in a friend of the bridegroom) is debated.

<sup>17</sup>The *qinah* meter of 3 + 2 stressed syllables is the rhythm of the dirge, cf. E. Gerstenberger, *Psalms: Part I with an Introduction to Cultic Poetry* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988) 11.

<sup>18</sup>O. Kaiser, *Isaiah 1-12 [OTL]*, 2nd ed., trans. J. Bowden (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1983) 90-91.

<sup>19</sup>The six woes described here, with a seventh woe later (cf. 10:1), forms a pattern similar to the number of the seals, trumpets and bowls of wrath in the Apocalypse (cf. Rv. 6, 8-9, 11, 16).

perform his works for their benefit (5:18-19). This is the attitude that views God's role as the fulfiller of human desires. God becomes the cosmic bellhop.<sup>20</sup> The fourth woe condemns the reversal of values in which good and evil are redefined (5:20). The fifth woe denounces conventional wisdom which is driven by self-interest. The final woe castigates the dishonest, drunken magistrates who offer exonerations in exchange for money under the table while delivering harsh penalties against innocents who refuse to play the game of bribery (5:22-23). Such people who reject God's Torah will be destroyed as surely as fire consumes straw or wind blows away dried flowers (5:24).

Now Isaiah introduces a vivid metaphor of God's coming discipline. He pictures Yahweh with upraised hand to strike repeated blows of judgment against his children (5:25). Such language recalls the bitter blows leveled against the Egyptians in the exodus (cf. Ex. 3:20; 11:1),<sup>21</sup> except here they will be leveled against the people of Israel. Later, the metaphor will be continued in a veritable rain of blows against the Israelites (cf. 9:12b, 17b, 21b; 10:4b). It is no wonder that God saw his people as children with "only wounds and welts" (cf. 1:6b). The blows of judgment would be historical disasters, and to execute his judgments, God had raised the battle ensign to rally the troops of the Assyrians and signaled them to invade (5:26a). With a devastating army, this distant enemy would attack Israel and Judah savagely, like a pride of lions roaring over a kill (5:26b-30).

### **The Syro-Ephraimite Alliance and the Three Child-Signs (7:1--9:7)**

This section of Isaiah's Memoirs are situated early in the reign of Ahaz. Uzziah had been dead for several years, and his son Jotham had ruled successfully for sixteen years, earning qualified commendation from the biblical historians (2 Kg. 15:32-35; 2 Chr. 27:1-9). Ahaz, Jotham's son, now had ascended to the throne.<sup>22</sup> An international crisis was looming in the north. Tiglath-Pileser III of Assyria<sup>23</sup> previously had exacted tribute from the northern nation of Israel before withdrawing temporarily (2 Kg. 15:19-20). Now, however, he began a concerted invasion of northern Palestine that would enable Assyria to annex several regions (2 Kg. 15:29). In view of this threat, Ephraim (Israel) formed an alliance with its former enemy,

<sup>20</sup> Alternatively, the exodus passages might depict a cynical sarcasm which is aimed at God's predictions of judgment through his prophets as if to say, "So, if he is going to do something, let him do it if he can!"

<sup>21</sup> The graphic words in these passages are the noun *nega'* (= assault, blow) and the verb *nakah* (= to strike, batter).

<sup>22</sup> It is probable that Jotham and Ahaz were co-regent during the final years of Jotham's life, for even though the biblical account lists Jotham's reign at sixteen years, in another reference we find him still alive in the twentieth year of his reign (2 Kg. 15:30). We should assume that Ahaz, Jotham's son, was administrating the kingdom during the final years of his father's life. Such dual dating is characteristic of the Kings' record, cf. Thiele, 46-64.

<sup>23</sup> In the biblical narratives, Tiglath-Pileser III is referred to by the alternative name Pul, a name also known from a Babylonian king list, cf. ISBE 3.1051.

Aram (Syria), hoping that by combining forces they might offer sufficient resistance to stop the Assyrian invasion. This anti-Assyrian coalition intended to force Judah to join them in a triple alliance. Rezin of Aram and Pekah of Ephraim sent their armies against the young and vacillating Ahaz to compel Judah's support (2 Kg. 15:37; 16:5). They managed to wrest from Judah's control Elath, on the Gulf of Aqaba (2 Kg. 16:6), and they devastated many Judean towns. Casualties were severe for Judah, and many citizens were taken captive (2 Chr. 28:5-8). Jerusalem itself was put under siege (2 Kg. 16:5; Is. 7:1).<sup>24</sup> Rezin and Pekah threatened to depose Ahaz and install a puppet king of their own, a certain Ben-Tabe'el, who was not even from the family of David (7:2, 5-6). During the siege, God spoke to Isaiah and instructed him to deliver a message to the young Ahaz.

Yahweh instructed Isaiah to take his son with him in confronting Ahaz. Like Hosea before him (cf. Ho. 1:4, 6, 8-9), Isaiah had named his first son with a symbolic name, *Shear-Yashuv* (= a remnant will return). The name was at once a prediction of doom and a ray of hope. It is not unlikely that the presence of this son with the symbolic name was an implicit rebuke to Ahaz, who in his terror already had burned his own son as a human sacrifice to a pagan deity (2 Kg. 16:3). As Ahaz went to inspect the water supply for the city, a critical factor in any siege, Isaiah met him with the message that he was to stand firm in his faith, for Yahweh was his only hope (7:3-9).<sup>25</sup> The threats of Rezin and Pekah were temporary, and within sixty-five years, the land of Ephraim would be shattered.

As assurance, Yahweh invited Ahaz to ask for a sign to confirm God's promise of security (7:10-11). Ahaz, in a gesture of pseudo-humility, refused "to put Yahweh to the test." He was not a serious worshiper of Yahweh in any case, preferring instead the pagan ways of the Canaanites (2 Kg. 16:3-4//2 Chr. 28:1-4). For his impudence, God gave him a sign anyway! A maiden<sup>26</sup> would give birth to a son, naming him *Immanuel* (= God with us), and before the child was old enough

<sup>24</sup>There is an obvious correlation between 2 Kg. 16:5 and Is. 7:1, and it is not unlikely that the author of the Kings' record copied them from the Book of Isaiah, cf. F. Delitzsch, *Isaiah*, trans. J. Martin (rpt. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973) 206.

<sup>25</sup>There is a play on words in Isaiah's message of 7:9b, which may be paraphrased, "If your faith is not sure (*tameni*), your throne will not be secure (*te'amenu*)," cf. Anderson, 270.

<sup>26</sup>A tremendous amount of discussion has been given to the Hebrew word '*almah*' translated either "virgin" (ASV, NIV, NAB, NASB) or "young woman" (RSV, NEB). The word probably refers to a girl of marriageable age, cf. *BDB*, 761. However, the meaning of the word itself is not as precise as one might hope or as precise as the English translations might suggest. There are a few scholars who contend that it must necessarily mean "virgin," cf. *TWOT*, II.672. However, the evidence is slim and the conclusion of Youngblood is probably the most honest, that is, "The most that can be said of '*almah*' is that in all of its OT occurrences it seems to be used of an unmarried woman, a 'damsel'--which, in situations such as the one before us, carries with it a strong presumption in favor of virginity," R. Youngblood, *ISBE* (1982) 2.807. However one translates '*almah*' in Isaiah, its translation should not undermine what the birth narratives in Matthew and Luke plainly describe, that is, that Jesus was conceived miraculously in Mary's womb while she was still a virgin.

even to make mature moral decisions, the lands of Aram and Ephraim would be wiped out (7:13-16).<sup>27</sup> The name of the child, "God with us," was a reflection of the divine promise to protect Ahaz if he would put his faith in Yahweh.<sup>28</sup> However, God's presence would be there not only to protect, but also to judge, and while Judah would be protected from Ephraim and Aram, the nation soon would be invaded by Assyria as a further sign of God's presence (7:17-25; cf. 8:6-8). Assyria would be like a razor to shave Judah bare (7:20).<sup>29</sup> All the grain crops would be ruined so that people would eke out an existence with the few cattle and sheep that remained (7:21-22). This explains why the Immanuel child would eat curds and honey (cf. 7:15, 22). The vineyards would be covered with briars, and the farms would be overgrown with thorns and wild growth, fit for nothing more than hunting or grazing (7:23-25).

If Isaiah's son Shear-Yashuv was the first sign-child, and Immanuel the second, Isaiah now describes yet another, the birth of his son *Maher-Shallal-Hash-Baz* (= quick to the plunder, swift to the spoil).<sup>30</sup> Before the birth or even the conception of this son, Isaiah had the symbolic name notarized by Uriah, a priest of the royal court (cf. 2 Kg. 16:11, 16), and another witness (8:1-2). This child also served as a sign guaranteeing the fall of Damascus and Samaria, the respective capitals of Aram and Ephraim. The child was duly planned, conceived, born and named (8:3-4). Together, the three sign-names stood as living reminders of Isaiah's message from God:

*Shear-Yashuv* (= only a remnant will return from the coming disaster)

*Immanuel* (= God is among us, both to protect but also to judge)

*Maher-Shallal-Hash-Baz* (= disaster will soon come upon Aram and Ephraim)

The signs notwithstanding, Ahaz stubbornly refused to rely upon God.

<sup>27</sup> Seven hundred years later, Matthew would see a prophetic connection between the prediction of a sign-child born in the reign of Ahaz and the birth of Jesus (Mt. 1:23). Matthew probably presupposes a double fulfillment, one in the eighth century B.C. and a recapitulation in the nativity stories. The birth of Jesus "made full" the word of Yahweh. Jesus was Immanuel in the fullest sense, not merely God invisibly among the people to protect and judge, but God visibly among the people to save them from their sins!

<sup>28</sup> Though some have suggested that Isaiah was the father of the Immanuel child, nothing in the text supports such a suggestion. The circumstances surrounding the birth of Immanuel are (deliberately?) omitted.

<sup>29</sup> Shaving a man's head, beard and genitals was considered an insulting disgrace (cf. 2 Sa. 10:4), P. McCarter, Jr., *II Samuel [AB]* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1984) 270-271. The Hebrew text reads, "Hair of the feet" (not "legs," as in the NIV). The word "feet" was a Hebrew euphemism for the genitals, and Watts correctly renders this as "pubic hair," cf. Watts, 105.

<sup>30</sup> It is not immediately clear whether Maher-Shallal-Hash-Baz is the same as Immanuel or someone different. The similarity of phrases in 8:4 and 7:16 argue for the former, but the fact that there is nothing in the Immanuel prophecy to indicate that the Immanuel child was Isaiah's son favors the latter.

Instead, he took disastrous action. Fearful of the siege of his capital, he sent envoys to Tiglath-Pileser of Assyria with a pitiful cry for help and a pledge of vassalship (2 Kg. 16:7-8; 2 Chr. 28:16). Tiglath-Pileser was only too happy to comply (2 Kg. 16:9; 2 Chr. 28:20)! He invaded Aram, executing Rezin, and annexed a considerable part of Ephraim (2 Kg. 15:29). In response to Ahaz' rash action, Isaiah again confronted Jerusalem with a message from God. The nation had scorned "the gently flowing waters of Shiloah,"<sup>31</sup> a symbol of quiet confidence in God and probably the very aqueduct Ahaz had been inspecting when Isaiah confronted him the first time and (7:3, 9b; 8:6). Because they had rejected this quiet call to faith, now they could expect a flood of grief from the Assyrians (8:6-10). Once again, the sign-child Immanuel figures significantly in the prophecy. The land of the Immanuel-child would be devastated (8:8), and his name would no longer symbolize protection, but instead, judgment. Nevertheless, the land-hungry empire-builders of Mesopotamia would not be able to completely obliterate Judah. No matter what strategy they devised to remove Judah from the roster of nations in the Levant, it would be foiled, because "God is with us," to guarantee the survival of a remnant (8:10)!

Now comes a divine message to Isaiah himself. He was sternly warned not to yield to the political fears of Ahaz and the policy-makers in Jerusalem. The conspiracy of Rezin and Pekah was not to be feared--only God himself was to be feared (8:11-13)! If there was a sanctuary from the powers of evil, it was only in Yahweh himself (8:14a). If his divine sanctuary was rejected, Yahweh would become a stumbling stone, a trap and a snare to the unbelievers (8:14b-15; cf. 28:16).<sup>32</sup> In view of the general lack of faith in God, Isaiah was to take his stand with the community of those who did trust in the Lord. In the community of the faithful, Isaiah's prophetic witness would be sealed for the future when all these predictions would come to pass. He and the sign-children stood as a testimony to the coming disaster (8:16-18). The sealed documents of his predictions were the invisible testimony, while the living signs of his sons were the visible testimony. Though others might appeal to the occultic mediums of the pagans, Isaiah and the community of faith must be content to consult God alone. Only the "law and testimony" (8:20a), the oracles which God gave Isaiah concerning the future (cf. 8:16), were valid predictions. Anything less was darkness and disaster (8:20b-22).

In his "testimony," Isaiah has painted a terrible picture of the distress about to

<sup>31</sup>Archaeologists believe that the waters of Shiloah (8:6) and the aqueduct (7:3) were a canal along the outside slope of the City of David, channeling water from the Gihon Spring to a large reservoir at the lowest part of the Tyropoeon Valley, cf. A. Mazar, *Archaeology of the Land of the Bible ca. 10,000-586 B.C.E.* (New York: Doubleday, 1990) 483.

<sup>32</sup>In the New Testament, the apostles appeal to this very passage to describe the spiritual failure of those who rejected Jesus (cf. 1 Co. 1:23; Ro. 9:32-33; 1 Pe. 2:8).

descend upon Jerusalem and the people of Judah. However, judgment is never God's final word, and it is not his final word here. Though the northern clans in Galilee would suffer immediate deportation to Assyria (cf. 2 Kg. 15:29), this same region would be greatly honored in the future (9:1)! To the people upon whom the darkness of Assyrian invasion was descending, a new and joyful day would dawn (9:2-3). Just as in the days of the judges the oppression of the Midianites was shattered by the men of Gideon when they smashed their lamps and light suddenly burst forth (9:4; cf. Jg. 7), so the Assyrian oppressor would be shattered and the implements of conquest discarded (9:5). This vision of peace would be fulfilled because of a coming birth in the family of David, a child destined to reign on the throne of David (9:6-7). Unlike Ahaz, whose weak, vacillating politics and fascination with paganism was leading the nation astray, this future king would rule forever with justice and righteousness. His reign would be established by Yahweh TsabaOTH himself! Most of the kings of Judah had been weakly advised, powerless in war, disgraceful in their role as fathers of the nation, and failures in bringing peace. The coming King, by contrast, would succeed in each of these respects. He would be heralded as the Wonderful Counselor,<sup>33</sup> the Mighty God,<sup>34</sup> the Father Forever and the Prince of Peace. From the beginning, Christians have always understood these exalted titles to refer to Jesus, the incarnation of God!

The remaining oracles in Isaiah's Memoirs contain the repeating metaphor of God at work. Isaiah first depicts God as the parent correcting his son, a father with hand upraised to strike repeated blows of discipline upon his rebel child (9:12b, 17b, 21b, 10:4b). Then he describes God's implement for discipline, Assyria, the rod of correction (10:5). However, Assyria is nothing more than God's tool, and in the end, God also would punish the Assyrians (10:12). Yahweh is the sovereign lord of history, and Assyria is no different than an ax, saw, rod or club--only a tool which God uses (10:15). In the conquest under Joshua, God had used Israel as the sword of judgment against the sins of the Canaanites (cf. Ge. 15:16); now he will use the Assyrians as the rod of discipline on the back of his own son, Israel.

### **God's Judgment on Ephraim (9:8--10:4)**

The first oracle in this section is directed against the northern nation, Ephraim (Israel), with its capital in Samaria (9:8-9a). Apparently, Tiglath-Pileser III had already begun to answer the frantic call for help from Ahaz by invading the northern

<sup>33</sup>Most translators agree that the words "Wonderful" and "Counselor" should be taken as a single title in Hebrew construct form (i.e., "Wonder of One Counseling," so NIV, NASB, RSV, NAB) rather than as two different titles (so KJV).

<sup>34</sup>There is no need to paraphrase this title as "in battle God-like" (so NEB) or "God-like hero" or some such phrase. The title *El Gibbor* as "the Mighty God," as used later by Isaiah (cf. 10:21) and Jeremiah (Je. 32:18), is quite sufficient, see discussion in E. Young, *The Book of Isaiah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965) I.335-338.

regions (cf. 2 Kg. 16:7-9; 15:29). In spite of his advances, however, the Israelites of Samaria regarded his invasion as only a temporary set-back (9:b-10). Isaiah's word was that God was behind the Assyrian advance against Rezin and northern Israel, and it would not be stopped (9:11-12). The Assyrian conquest was the "word of Yahweh" against Jacob, and it would "fall" on Israel (9:8).<sup>35</sup>

The Assyrian invasion did nothing to turn the northern Israelites back to the Lord. Both elders and prophets, the leaders of the community, were misguided liars, and God announced that he would cut them off like the head and tail of an animal (9:13-16). The lower classes were no better, for everyone was "ungodly and wicked" (9:17). The whole nation was so turned over to evil that it was burning like a brush fire out of control (9:18). Anarchy was rampant (9:19-21). Those in power used their positions for personal profit at the expense of the poor (10:1-2). But the day of reckoning, the Day of Yahweh, was coming (10:3-4)!

### **God's Judgment on Assyria (10:5-19)**

If anyone should object, like Habakkuk did (cf. Hab. 1:12b-13), that God was using a nation even more wicked than Israel as the club of punishment, God announced that Assyria was also a nation under judgment (10:5). Though God had used Assyria to discipline "godless" Israel (10:6), the Assyrians did not perceive the cause of their victory. They had no inkling that they were being used by God (10:7). Instead, they believed their victory was due to their own ingenuity (10:8-11). Though completely unaware of God's purposes, the Assyrians would attack Jerusalem as part of God's divine parental discipline. Only after God had finished all his disciplinary work would he then turn the hand of judgment back on Assyria (10:12). Though Tiglath-Pileser III believed himself invincible (10:13-14),<sup>36</sup> God considered him no more than a utensil (10:15). In the end, dire judgment would fall upon the Assyrian army, destroying them in a single day (10:16-19). The execution of this coming judgment would be fulfilled in Isaiah's later career, during the reign of Hezekiah (cf. Is. 36-37).

### **A Remnant will Return (10:20-34)**

Isaiah's first son, *Shear-yashuv* (= a remnant will return), was a symbol of both judgment and hope. Here, the meaning of that symbol is explained more fully. Though Ahaz had "leaned on" Assyria in calling for help, and in the end, his nation

<sup>35</sup>The use of the verb *naphal* (= to fall) with the word of Yahweh as its subject depicts the Lord's word of judgment as a weapon of war.

<sup>36</sup>The language in these verses is strikingly similar to the language of Assyrian inscriptions and royal annals, so much so, that scholars believe Isaiah may have been already familiar with such Assyrian bombastic rhetoric and deliberately used it against them, cf. R. Clements, *Isaiah 1-39 [NCBC]* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980) 112.

would pay dearly for his folly, the future surviving remnant of Israel would no longer rely on pagan kings who turned against them (10:20a). Instead, they would rely on Yahweh (10:20b). So, though God would use the Assyrians to discipline his people, the entire body of Israelites would not be exterminated. A remnant would survive after God's righteous judgment had been executed (10:21-23).

In the meantime, the people of Judah need not fear the Assyrians. As intimidating as they seemed, very soon they, too, would be destroyed, just as God once destroyed the Egyptians at the Red Sea and the Midianites in the time of Gideon (10:24-26; cf. Ex. 14:16-18, 26-28; Jg. 7:25). The Assyrian yoke of oppression would be broken (10:27)!

The advance of the Assyrians would certainly be frightening! Isaiah depicts their invasion from the north, naming the various conquests and campsites as the army moved southward (10:28-32).<sup>37</sup> Because the vision of Isaiah shows the attack moving from north to south, yet the various narrative descriptions of Sennacherib's invasion in 701 B.C. depicts the attack moving from south to north (cf. Is. 36:2; 2 Kg. 18:17; 2 Chr. 32:9), many interpreters consider Isaiah's vision to be non-literal, that is, as depicting the invasion without implying that the armies would pass through each city mentioned. However, the two sets of data are not necessarily incompatible, since many ancient examples exist of armies which, for one reason or another, attacked from one direction, made a circuit around a critical target, and then attacked it from another direction. Conceivably, this could have happened with the siege of Jerusalem.<sup>38</sup> Nevertheless, though the Assyrians would "shake their fist" at Jerusalem, Yahweh would devastate the Assyrian army like a forester cutting down trees with an ax (10:33-34). Isaiah's vivid metaphor is particularly apt in view of what God would later do to the Assyrians during the kingship of Hezekiah (37:36-37//2 Kg. 19:35-36).

### **The Stump of Jesse Will Produce a Shoot (11:1-16)**

Several times, Isaiah has employed the metaphor of deforestation to depict the devastation of war. In his commission to prophethood, Isaiah was told that his oracles would be in effect until "the holy seed will be the stump in the land" (6:13b). The judgment of God was described as "a day...for all the cedars of Lebanon, tall and lofty, and all the oaks of Bashan" (2:12-13). The vineyard of Yahweh would be destroyed (5:5). When the people of Judah heard the threats of Assyrian invasion, Ahaz and his supporters "were shaken, as trees of the forest are shaken by the wind" (7:2). Instead of a thousand vines, the land would be reduced to briars and thorns

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<sup>37</sup>For the locations of most of these cities, see Map 154 in Y. Aharoni et al., *The Macmillan Bible Atlas*, 3rd ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1993) 118.

<sup>38</sup>G. Grogan, "Isaiah," *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. F. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986) 6.85.

(7:23-25). But if this judgment of deforestation would happen to Israel and Judah, it would happen also to Assyria, completing destroying the Assyria forest as well (10:17-19). God would "lop off the boughs" of the Assyrian army, cutting down its forest will a divine ax (10:33-34). This metaphor of deforestation is the background for the stump-branch metaphor, Isaiah's message of hope for the future. If the holy seed of Israel would be left like a stump in the land (6:13b), a Branch of Yahweh one day would flourish (4:2). If the family of Jesse and the Davidic dynasty would be cut down along with the other Israelite families, still the stump of Jesse was not lifeless. A small shoot would grow from this stump, a fruit-bearing Branch (11:1). The description of such a Branch from Jesse's family must surely be the same as the child to be born who would rule on David's throne (9:6-7; cf. 16:4b-5; Ho. 3:4-5; Je. 23:5-6; 33:14-18).<sup>39</sup>

The "fruit" of this coming Branch would be glorious indeed! The Branch would be filled with the Spirit of Yahweh (11:2), and his administration would rectify the repeated injustices against the poor of the earth (11:3-4a). He would judge the earth and establish a reign of universal peace, eliminating all harmful ambitions while spreading the knowledge of Yahweh throughout the whole world (11:4b-9). Even in the animal kingdom, all violence would cease. Changing the metaphor dramatically, the Branch is now called the Root of Jesse, one who is both Jesse's origin as well as his offspring (11:10a). (This passage, of course, is the origin of the famous description in the Apocalypse of John which describes Jesus as "the Root and Offspring of David," cf. Rv. 22:16; cf. 5:5). The mixed metaphor introduces a deliberate tension not to be resolved until the appearance of Jesus, who is both David's Son and David's Lord (cf. Mt. 22:43-45//Mk. 12:35-37//Lk. 20:41-44). With the appearance of Jesus, Paul can boldly say that Jesus is the Root of Jesse, and the rallying of the nations to him is fulfilled in the preaching of the Christian gospel to the Gentiles (11:10; Ro. 15:8-12). Changing the metaphor once again, Isaiah says that this coming Root of Jesse will be a banner to which the nations will rally (11:10b). The holy remnant will be gathered from the lands of exile, both Israel and the nations, from the four quarters of the earth (11:12).

This remnant theology, like other subjects relating to the Day of Yahweh, has both a near and far reference. In the near future, it refers to the return of the exiles from Mesopotamia on "a highway...from Assyria" (11:16). It is far from accidental that the returning exiles under Zerubbabel are called "the remnant of this people" (Zec. 8:6, 11-12). However, the fulfillment in the return of the Jews from exile did not exhaust this prediction about a returning remnant, as the apostles make clear in

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<sup>39</sup>In the post-exilic community, there was a preliminary fulfillment of the Branch prophecy in Zerubbabel, the leader who supervised the construction of the second temple (Zec. 6:12). However, it is equally clear that Zerubbabel did not exhaust the prophecy, since he, along with Joshua the High Priest, were "symbolic of things to come" (Zec. 3:8).

the New Testament. In a broader sense, the remnant also refers to those who by faith accept the message of Jesus (Ac. 15:15-18). When James quotes Amos 9:11-12 concerning the salvation of the Gentiles, his plural reference to "the prophets" must surely include Isaiah. In fact, Paul directly refers to Isaiah's prediction of a surviving remnant and applies it to those who come to faith in Jesus Christ (Ro. 9:27-29).

The Branch and Root of Jesse would become a rallying ensign for the survivors of both the northern and southern nations (11:12). No longer would Ephraim and Judah be divided by border wars (11:13), but they would unite to extend the borders of Israel to the full measure achieved in the time of David, encompassing Philistia, Edom, Moab and Ammon (11:14). Just as Yahweh once brought his people across the Red Sea in Egypt (cf. Ex. 14:21-22), he would now bring them home in a second exodus over the Euphrates River from Mesopotamia (11:15-16).

### **Israel's Song of Salvation (12)**

God's purposes in judgment and restoration would result in salvation for the remnant of his people. He would discipline Ephraim with the rod of Assyria, sending the northern nation into exile. He then would discipline Judah with the same Assyrian club, sparing Jerusalem by divine intervention. Assyria also was a nation under judgment, and God would cut down the Assyrian war machine like a woodsman hacking down a huge tree. Then, from the stump of Jesse's family, God would cause a small shoot to grow up, a Branch filled with the divine Spirit. He would rally the nations to himself, and in the end, he would bring Israel and Judah home from exile. The fulfillment of these breath-taking predictions would begin in the near future, but their terminus was unknown. Only in retrospect can Christians see that their fulfillment reaches all the way to the coming of Jesus, the Messiah.

In view of the final hope of Israel, Isaiah composes a song of exaltation for the remnant to celebrate the coming salvation of God. God's anger, which repeatedly was "not turned away" (cf. 9:12b, 17b, 21b; 10:4b) would finally be "turned away" (12:1). Yahweh's salvation would be proclaimed "to all the world" (12:3-6). These themes of salvation and proclamation stretch far ahead to the Christian preaching of the gospel.

### **Oracles To The Nations (Is. 13-23)**

The fact that the Torah begins with God's creation of the universe and the formation of the nations is an important theological statement beyond merely the various stories about Adam, Noah and Nimrod. It is a statement that God is not a provincial deity. In the ancient Near East, provincial deities were the norm among

the Canaanite and Mesopotamian peoples. Philistia had its Dagon, Ammon its Molech, and Babylon its Marduk. Yahweh was not like that, however. His kingdom ruled over all (Ps. 103:19)!

To be sure, God called Abraham, and from his posterity, he chose Israel to be his special people (Dt. 7:6; 10:15). The history of the Hebrew Bible from the time of Abraham and later is largely concerned with the historical fortunes of this divinely chosen people. However, God's choice of Israel was not simply gratuitous privilege. He chose Abraham for blessing and Israel for service. In the posterity of Abraham, it was God's purpose to bring blessing to the nations of the world (Ge. 12:3; 18:18; 22:18; 26:4). The nation Israel was to serve as a kingdom of priests. At Sinai, God spoke to the people of Israel through Moses and declared, "Out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Ex. 19:5b-6).

Israel's choice for service placed the nation in a special role among the other nations of the world. In one sense, Israel was God's tool of judgment upon the Canaanites for their wickedness (cf. Ge. 15:16). In another, Israel was to declare among the nations the truth and glory of the one true God (Is. 43:21). When Israel failed to perform her service, she profaned God's name among the nations, miserably failing to fulfill his intended purpose (Eze. 36:20-23).

Still, whether Israel succeeded or failed, the fact remained that God held the nations accountable to himself. In the writing prophets, there are substantial sections which are addressed to the nations of the world. God is the judge of all! Already Isaiah has announced that God "has a day in store" when he will "judge between the nations" (Is. 2:12, 4). His ultimate purpose is that he will be recognized by the nations, not merely by Israel (Is. 2:2; 12:4). However, just as God's future for Israel was judgment before restoration, it was judgment before restoration for the nations as well.

The next major collection of Isaiah's oracles are sermons of judgment against the nations. He will preach against Babylon, Assyria, Philistia, Moab, Aram, Cush, Egypt, Edom, Arabia, Judah and Phoenicia. All the nations were under divine judgment!

### **Against Babylon, the First Oracle (13:1--14:23)**

It is striking that Isaiah's first oracle is against Babylon, since during the eighth century, Babylon was hardly more than a vassal to Assyria. Nevertheless, Babylon would figure significantly in the future of Jerusalem, for Babylon would accomplish the exile of Judah a century or so after Isaiah's death. The vision of Isaiah against Babylon begins with a mustering of troops for war (13:1-5). Whatever the human designs in this muster, Isaiah makes clear that they are simply fulfilling

the purposes of Yahweh (13:4b, 5b). The war against Babylon is called "the Day of Yahweh" (13:6, 9). While the oracle may envision conflicts between Assyria and Babylon in Isaiah's own time,<sup>40</sup> it also is broader than any a local conflict, for it describes the destruction in cosmic terms, including the disintegration of the universe (13:10, 13). This superimposing of the near future with ultimate doomsday is typical of the Hebrew prophets.

The judgment of Babylon would be a day of cruelty and terror (13:6-9a), a day when God would judge the sinners of the world (13:9b, 11-12). The horrors of war would fall upon young and old (13:14-16). The Medes, who along with the Persians would bring about the collapse of the Babylonian Empire in 539 B.C., would be the instruments of God's judgment (13:17-18). Babylon would be destroyed, never to rise again. This judgment would begin in the very near future, as Isaiah predicted (13:22b), for in 689 B.C. Sennacherib would devastate Babylon. Over the centuries, Babylon repeatedly would be the object of demolition until, by the end of the first century B.C., it would be, in the words of the Greek geographer Strabo (c. 63 B.C.--c. 24 A.D.), nothing but a desert (13:19-22).<sup>41</sup>

If God's purpose was to destroy Babylon, the epitome of worldly pride, his purpose also was to restore his chosen people from exile. The larger issue behind God's choice of Israel in the exodus was not in order to isolate her from the other nations of the world, as though she had value and they did not, but in fact was to position her as a mediator of blessing and reconciliation to the nations. If the original choice of Israel would come to an end in the Babylonian exile of Judah, God would make a new beginning by choosing Israel yet again from the land of exile. Though God would judge the nations, yet even from among the nations a remnant of aliens would be joined to the remnant of Israel, and so fulfill God's broader purpose in choosing Israel (14:1-2).

Babylon, for its part, was not only a city and an empire, it was a symbol of all worldly arrogance which rejected Yahweh and his eternal purposes. Thus, when Isaiah takes up a taunt song against Babylon, it is a taunt that depicts Babylon as the worldly system which defies Yahweh, the true and only God. The taunt song, as a literary form in Hebrew poetry, often appears as a direct address to an opponent. It ridicules his pretensions and scoffs at his destruction. Various passages in the poetry of the prophets and elsewhere include taunt songs (e.g., Jg. 5:28-31; Eze. 32:1-6, etc.). In this passage, the ruler of Babylon, who is the opponent to the people of Israel, is taunted in a song that describes his ultimate destruction by the power of God (14:3-8). His descent into Sheol, the place of the dead, is vividly

<sup>40</sup>D. Wiseman, *ISBE* (1979) 1.394.

<sup>41</sup>Young, 427.

portrayed (14:9-11). In powerful imagery, his claims to deity are derided (14:12-15), and at last, he finds himself in Sheol, no greater than anyone else in the world (14:16ff.).

Within this taunt song, the king of Babylon is addressed by the title Daystar, Son of the Dawn (14:12),<sup>42</sup> which has become famous as an acronym for Satan. Not all exegetes are convinced that the metaphor of the Daystar is a reference to Satan, but it may well be that the fall of Satan lies behind the metaphor. There is general agreement that behind this passage lies a poetic reference to an attempt to usurp the throne of God (14:13-14). When the king of Babylon descends to the place of the dead, all the others who are already there are shocked that this one, who once was the pinnacle of pomp and glory, is now so completely humiliated (14:16-20a). Those who had lived by the sword died by the sword (14:20b-23)!

### **Against Assyria (14:24-27)**

What was true for Babylon was just as true for Assyria--and Assyria's fall would come much sooner! God had taken oath that he would destroy Assyria for its arrogance (14:24-25). Furthermore, what God had decreed for Babylon and Assyria was equally applicable to all the power-brokers of the world (14:26a). Just as his hand was upraised to strike down Israel (cf. 5:25; 9:12b, 17b, 21b; 10:4b), it also was raised to strike down Assyria and the other nations (14:26b-27). Assyria and Babylon might aspire to world conquest, but the sovereign God alone would determine the future of the nations!

### **Against Philistia (14:28-32)**

This oracle is dated to the year of Ahaz' death (14:28), though there is debate about the exact year (it was probably between 725 and 715 B.C.). Also, it envisions the death of the Assyrian warlord (either Tiglath Pileser III or Shalmaneser V), the "rod" which now was broken (14:29a). This rod must not be regarded as gone forever, however, for the Assyrians would be back in full force (14:29b-31). The Philistine celebration was premature. Later, when another Assyrian warlord would arise, they would send envoys to Jerusalem to invite the Israelites to join an anti-Assyrian coalition (14:32a), but it would be futile. The only hope for Judah was to trust in God (14:32b).

### **Against Moab (15:1--16:14)**

Moab, Judah's neighbor to the east, becomes the next object of judgment. Moab's most important cities were sentenced to lie in ruins (15:1-9). Refugees

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<sup>42</sup>The name Lucifer is the KJV translation (via the Latin Vulgate) of the Hebrew *heylel* (= Daystar). Though this is the only place in the Hebrew Bible containing the name, the appellation has become a popular one for Satan.

would attempt their escape only with what they could carry (15:5-7), and the land would be full of wailing (15:2, 3, 4, 5, 8). Though perennially at war with Judah, the Moabite refugees would beg for help from their former enemies (16:1-4a).

The response from Jerusalem to this plea for asylum comes from the Hebrew prophets. Jerusalem's hope, and therefore Moab's, is that one day God will establish a new ruler in David's line, one who will be truly just and righteous (16:4b-5).<sup>43</sup> In the meantime, however, Moab's sins would be her undoing. The judgment was deserved, and Moab's pride would be broken when the northern enemy would strip her land bare and ruin her vineyards, orchards and fields (16:6-10). In the end, Moab would be a pitiful wreck, abandoned by her gods and without resource (16:11-12). The judgment against Moab concludes with a solemn prose pronouncement that the doom of Moab would be completed within three years (16:13-14).

### **Against Aram (17)**

Isaiah now turns toward the north to deliver an oracle of judgment against Damascus, the capital of Aram. The background for the oracle is northern Israel's alliance with Aram in the anti-Assyrian coalition (cf. 7:1ff.), which accounts for the frequent asides to Ephraim. In spite of their efforts to coerce Judah into joining them, both these nations would be devastated.<sup>44</sup> Their fortresses would be abandoned, the land turned over to grazing, and only a remnant would survive (17:1-6, 9). Aram had never served God, but Israel had forgotten him (17:10-11). Only the bitter reality of judgment could turn them away from the pagan altars and back toward their Creator (17:7-8).

God's judgment against Aram was no different than his judgment against all the nations. Though the nations of the whole world might roar against Judah, God's people could count on the sovereign God to judge them all (17:12-14)!

### **Against Cush (18)**

Chapters 18-20 are all oracles against the African nations associated with Egypt. Cush<sup>45</sup> and Egypt were one at this period of history. An Ethiopian dynasty had come to power in the eighth century B.C., taking over Thebes and eventually Memphis and lower Egypt.

<sup>43</sup>Some scholars do not see 16:4b-5 as Judah's response, but rather, as Moab's flattery which plays upon the notions of the prophets.

<sup>44</sup>The "cities of Aroer" are problematic (17:2), since they do not seem to be near Damascus. The RSV and other translations follow the LXX and the Targums in eliminating the reference to Aroer and rendering the phrase "her cities will be deserted forever" (so also NAB, NEB, NASBmg).

<sup>45</sup>Cush includes modern Ethiopia and the northern Sudan--the territory of ancient Nubia.

Pianky, the Ethiopian, assumed the title of pharaoh and established Egypt's Twenty-fifth Dynasty.<sup>46</sup> He sent envoys from the "land of whirring wings" (the Nile lowlands where insects swarm) to Hezekiah, probably to persuade Judah to join in yet another anti-Assyrian coalition (18:1-2). Isaiah, however, had a word from Yahweh for these tall, smooth-shaven visitors. God looks calmly upon the frantic efforts of nations to preserve themselves (18:3-4). He himself would destroy the Assyrian war machine without human help (18:5-6). In the end, the Nubians would return to Jerusalem, this time not to plead for a military pact, but to worship Yahweh on Mt. Zion in Jerusalem (18:7; cf. 2:3-4).

### **Against Egypt (19)**

Doomsday was coming for Egypt, and Yahweh would bring it (19:1)! The disaster would begin with a civil war in Egypt (19:2-4), and it would climax when the canals and waterways failed in severe drought (19:5-7), causing a total economic collapse (19:8-10). The combined wisdom of Pharaoh and his counselors would not be enough to thwart the judgment of God (19:11-15).

Just as Yahweh had raised his hand to strike down his own people as well as Assyria in judgment (5:25; 9:12b, 17b, 21b; 10:4b; 14:26b-27), so now it was raised to strike down the Egyptians, too (19:16-17). Yet in the end, God's judgments in history would turn Egyptian hearts toward him (19:18). The Egyptians would become worshipers of Yahweh (19:19-22). Though in the eighth century B.C. the Assyrian war machine would launch itself against Egypt, yet in the future there would be peaceful relations between the two areas, for both Assyrians and Egyptians would be turned to true faith in the true God (19:23). Egypt, Assyria and Israel would be joined together in common faith and common worship (19:24-25).

### **Against Egypt and Cush (20)**

This oracle is recorded as a biographical narrative. The historical event that prompted the message was the Assyrian attack upon the Philistine city of Ashdod during the reign of Hezekiah of Judah, an event that can be accurately dated to 711 B.C. by Assyrian inscriptions (20:1).<sup>47</sup> The king of Ashdod had attempted to break his vassal relationship with Assyria and was crushed for his efforts. As a living parable, God ordered Isaiah to walk stripped and barefooted around Jerusalem for three years as a visible sign that, just as Ashdod had been stripped, so Egypt and Cush would be stripped by the Assyrians (20:2-4). Judah (and probably Philistia) had been invited by Egypt to join in an anti-Assyrian league (cf. 18:1), but such a

<sup>46</sup>E. Burns, et al., *World Civilizations*, 6th ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1982) I.44-46.

<sup>47</sup>J. Pritchard, ed., *The Ancient Near East: An Anthology of Texts and Pictures* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University, 1958) I.197.

course would be absolute folly (20:5-6). The Assyrians would not be stopped!

### **Against Babylon (21:1-10)**

Here, now, is a second oracle against Babylon (cf. 13:1ff.), though the name Babylon is not introduced until 21:9. In fact, the opening lines of the oracle are deliberately ambiguous, describing an invader and a looter from Elam and Media, but not indicating their victim (21:1-2).<sup>48</sup> Apparently, Isaiah saw the scenes of horror in a vision, and they caused him acute personal distress (21:3-4). The Babylonian officers, on the other hand, were oblivious to what was coming (21:5). In the end, Babylon would be shattered (21:6-10), and the refrain, "Babylon is fallen," would be taken up hundreds of years later by John in the Apocalypse (cf. Rv. 18:2).

### **Against Edom (21:11-12)**

Earlier, Isaiah had preached against Judah's other immediate neighbors, such as, Moab and Philistia. Now, he turns to the southeast. Dumah, a city in Edom, was probably chosen because its name means "silence," an ominous portent of the future (21:11a). To the simple question, "What time is it?," the answer is both cryptic and foreboding. Morning is coming, but another night is coming, too (21:11b-12)!

### **Against Arabia (21:13-17)**

Even further to the southeast lay the Arabian desert. Yet the Arabians' relative security would not save them from the Assyrians. Refugees would flee to the oases in the desert (21:13-15), for in 715 B.C., Sargon II would conduct a campaign against northern Arabia (21:16-17).

### **Against Jerusalem (22)**

The presence of Jerusalem in this series of doom oracles comes as something of a surprise. All the other oracles have been against foreigners, but Jerusalem was not exempt from God's judgment either. If there were any feelings of smug security, Isaiah intended to shatter such presumption. The Assyrian war machine was going to devastate everyone else, so Judah would be devastated, too! Two oracles describe Jerusalem in the time of Hezekiah.

The first accuses Jerusalem's citizens of callous indifference over the

<sup>48</sup>Interpreters seem to be divided along two lines as to the specific historical circumstance behind this oracle. One is the complicated rise and fall of Merodach-Baladan in his efforts to secure Babylon's independence from Assyria near the end of the eighth century B.C. The other, more well-known, is the fall of Babylon in the sixth century B.C. to the armies of Cyrus, the Persian. Regardless of the specific circumstance, the oracle is quite clear as to its main point--that mighty Babylon would be destroyed!

devastation of the Judean countryside. If this oracle presupposes the city's deliverance from Sennacherib in 701 B.C. (to be taken up in detail in chapters 36-37), it depicts the citizens of Jerusalem hooting with relief over their unexpected respite (22:1-2a; cf. 37:36-37) and killing what was left of the animals in order to celebrate (22:13). The departure of the Assyrian general could hardly be credited to Judean bravery, however. The army was a disgrace, and any soldiers who died were not killed in battle. Instead, some died trying to run away while the enemy was still distant (22:2b-3)! Inscriptions by Sennacherib bluntly state that Hezekiah's troops deserted him!<sup>49</sup> This irony between the people's present celebration and their previous cowardice was more than Isaiah could bear. He bitterly resented such flippancy (22:4). After all, even though Jerusalem had been spared, Sennacherib had put forty-six of Judah's walled cities under siege and destroyed countless small villages.<sup>50</sup>

In spite of the temporary relief, Isaiah knew that the future of Jerusalem was grim. The Assyrians and their cohorts from Elam and Kir would not disappear (22:5-8a). Instead, they were preparing for the final assault. But rather than look to God for help, the people of Jerusalem were looking only to themselves. They had busied themselves restocking the armory (22:8b; 1 Kg. 7:2; 10:17), frantically repairing the city wall even if it meant destroying residences to find sufficient stone (22:9-10), and increasing the size of their water reservoir (22:11a).<sup>51</sup> What they did not do, however, was look to the God who had given them Jerusalem in the first place (22:11b)! As impressive as Hezekiah's accomplishments were, Isaiah knew that they were largely a substitute for the most important thing of all--an absolute trust in God. When God called for repentance, the people only responded with cheap revelry and fatalism (22:12-13). For this, God would not forgive them (22:14).

The second oracle concerns two local figures during the reign of Hezekiah of Judah. The judgment of God against Jerusalem would also fall upon Shebna, the

<sup>49</sup>Pritchard, 200.

<sup>50</sup>Pritchard, 200.

<sup>51</sup>Hezekiah had already dug the tunnel under the city of David to maintain a constant water supply, but now the people wanted to create a great storage space for the excess water at Siloam. The original tunnel, popularly called "Hezekiah's Tunnel" (cf. 2 Kg. 20:20; 2 Chr. 32:3-4), was an underground shaft in the shape of a double 'S curve' that ran from the Gihon Spring to the Tyropoeon Valley, creating a water reservoir inside Jerusalem's city walls. The tunnel is still there today. The dramatic moment when the two teams of tunnelers met is recorded in the famous Siloam inscription, which reads as follows: *and this was the matter of the tunnel: While [the hewers wielded] the axe(s), each man towards his fellow, and while there were still three cubits to be he[vn], there was hear]d a man's voice calling to his fellow; for there was a fissure (?) in the rock on the right and [on the left]. And on the day it was tunneled through, the hewers struck [the rock], each man towards his fellow, axe against axe. And the water flowed from the spring towards the pool for one thousand and two hundred cubits. And a hundred cubits was the height of the rock above the head(s) of the hewers.* A. Mazar, *Archaeology of the Land of the Bible: ca. 10,000-586 B.C.E.* (New York: Doubleday, 1990) 483-485.

vizier of the king's palace (cf. 36:3, 11, 22; 37:2).<sup>52</sup> He was probably one of the court officials who had persuaded Hezekiah to revolt against Assyria (cf. 36:4-5). This man's arrogance was a microcosm of the people's arrogance. Shebna had decided to hew for himself a fancy tomb as a monument to his greatness (22:15-16).<sup>53</sup> Isaiah's dripping sarcasm, "O you mighty man," reduces him to his true level. He will die, sure enough, but he will not be buried in an elaborate tomb in Jerusalem. Instead, he will be deposed from office and exiled in disgrace (22:17-19). In his place, Yahweh would elevate Eliakim ben Hilkiah, giving him the office of city steward (22:20-24). Eliakim, not Shebna, would wear the huge key to the palace doors fastened to his tunic.<sup>54</sup> Shebna was like a rolling ball (22:18), but Eliakim would be like a peg driven deep into the wall (22:23). Yet, even so, "that day," the day of judgment, was coming upon Jerusalem. Eliakim, also, would fall in the coming disaster (22:25).

### **Against Phoenicia (23)**

Isaiah's final oracle against the nations condemned Tyre (23:1) and Sidon (23:2), the port cities of the Phoenicians. These cities truly were the "marketplace of the nations" (23:3). Nevertheless, the demise of Phoenicia was assured. Her clients from Cyprus, Egypt and Spain (Tarshish) would lament her fall (23:1-7, 14). Who planned the downfall of Phoenicia? Yahweh himself, for his sovereign intention was to bring down every power that exalted itself in pride (23:8-12). This humbling of the proud included the Babylonians, whom the Assyrians ravaged under Sargon II and Sennacherib (23:13).<sup>55</sup>

Tyre's demise, like Judah's, would last seventy years, probably referring to the period from 700 B.C. to 630 B.C., when Assyria did not permit Tyre to engage in sea trade (23:15). After Assyria's hold over Palestine came to an end, most of the western states again established their former trade practices.<sup>56</sup> Phoenicia's trade, depicted as prostitution with the nations, would be plied once again (23:16-17). Still, this restoration was not purely for her own benefit, but for the benefit of those

<sup>52</sup>The master of the palace in Judah was similar to the vizier in Egypt. He functioned as the first minister in the kingdom. All state affairs passed through his hands, and all documents were sealed with his seal. He saw to the opening of the royal gates and governed the city in the name of the king, cf. R. de Vaux, *Ancient Israel: Social Institutions* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1965) I.130-131.

<sup>53</sup>Isaiah's description of Shebna reminds one of Robert Browning's poem *The Bishop Orders His Tomb at Saint Praxed's Church*.

<sup>54</sup>Later, in the apocalypse of John, the symbol of authority to open and shut is given in a spiritual sense to Jesus Christ, the descendent of David (cf. Rv. 3:7).

<sup>55</sup>This verse is rendered variously by the translators. Of course, if the sense of the NIV is followed, as here, it is still true that the Babylonians later would rise up and destroy Assyria.

<sup>56</sup>S. Erlandson, *The Burden of Babylon: A Study of Isaiah 13:2--14:23* (Lund, C.W.K. Gleerup, 1970) 102.

who would serve the Lord (23:18).

## The Apocalypse of Isaiah (Is. 24-27)

Apocalyptic literature is a genre which came to its full form in the intertestamental period. However, the roots of this genre reach further back to the writings of Isaiah, Ezekiel, Zechariah and Daniel. In general, scholars distinguish prophecy from apocalyptic by saying that prophecy views the future in historical, local terms while apocalyptic views the future in symbolic, cosmic terms. Chapters 24-27 of Isaiah are generally recognized as featuring the cosmic, universal viewpoint, though perhaps not developed to the extent that it would be in later Jewish literature. Still, it exhibits features which justify its apocalyptic label.<sup>57</sup> In calling chapters 24-27 apocalyptic, however, one must be aware that this section does not share all of the characteristics that later apocalyptic would include (i.e., angelic guides, pessimism, pseudonymity, etc.). What it does share with later apocalyptic is the basic viewpoint of eschatological dualism, that is, a sharp contrast between the present age and the age to come. The present age is given over to evil, but the age to come will see the establishment of God's kingdom when God's people will be redeemed and all traces of sin and evil will be removed. The coming of the new age will not be a gradual transition in history, but rather, an abrupt intervention in history by an act of God. Also, Isaiah 24-27 shares with later apocalyptic the images of cosmic divine intervention painted in vivid colors. Universal cataclysm is portrayed alongside the preservation and salvation of God's elect. The striking symbolism of Yahweh's conflict with Leviathan is an added similarity.

## Divine Judgment on the World and the Coming Reign of God (24)

Isaiah begins with an announcement that God will devastate the earth. If earlier he has said, "Yahweh Tsabaoth has a day in store for all the proud and lofty" (cf. 2:12ff.), here he describes in detail God's judgment on the world. It will affect all people and all classes (24:1-3). The earth which has been defiled by the sins of its human inhabitants is under a divine curse (24:4-6a). True, a remnant will survive, but it will be very small indeed (24:6b). The sights and sounds of festivity will cease (24:7-9), and the city of humankind will lie ruined (24:10-13).<sup>58</sup>

<sup>57</sup>Many scholars argue that since this section features such apocalyptic style the work must be attributed to someone later than Isaiah. Such a conclusion is premature, however, and as George Ladd has argued, the connection between prophetic and apocalyptic literature must not be severed. In fact, there is a considerable case to be made for prophetic-apocalyptic style appearing side by side, cf. G. Ladd, *The Presence of the Future* (rpt. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974) 76-79.

<sup>58</sup>Some interpreters have tried to identify a specific city, such as, Jerusalem or Babylon. However, it is more likely that the reference is an apocalyptic symbol of the body of organized human society, more or less on the order of a "Vanity Fair," cf. Clements, 202. If it does refer in any sense to Babylon, it is more along the lines of a symbol of

In the midst of a disintegrating world, the voices of singers rise in the west, prompting the prophet to invite the people of the east to join them in giving glory to Yahweh (24:14-16a). The scene is almost identical to the one in the Revelation of John, where an angel declares, "Fear God and give him glory, because the hour of his judgment has come" (Rv. 14:7).<sup>59</sup>

The present conditions, however, are horrible. Treachery and terror rule (24:16b-18a). Under apocalyptic judgment, the heavens will rain while the earth will break apart (24:18b-20). The invisible powers of evil, which Isaiah calls the "host of heaven,"<sup>60</sup> will be punished along with the earthly kings who defy God. Together, they will be imprisoned (24:21-22). The moon and the sun will be affected as well at the judgment and reign of Yahweh Tsabaoth (24:23; cf. 13:10; 34:2-4; Eze. 32:7; Jl. 2:10, 31; 3:15).

### **The Song of the Redeemed (25)**

Isaiah now transports himself into the future and offers a song of exaltation in behalf of the surviving remnant. In his judgment of the world, God has performed what he had planned from the beginning (25:1). City, town and stronghold alike are reduced to rubble (25:2). All peoples will honor him (25:3), especially the poor for whom God has always demonstrated special compassion and mercy (25:4-5). A great banquet of celebration will be held for all the nations (25:6), while death, the shroud that comes to all people everywhere, will be lifted and destroyed forever (25:7-8a). By a sovereign act, God will remove the grief and disgrace of his redeemed people (25:8b). They will praise him for his wonderful salvation (25:9).

It is obvious that this passage was important to New Testament Christians in light of the coming of Jesus. The banquet for the nations finds its counterpart in the parables of Jesus about the wedding feast (Mt. 22:1-14; 25:1-13; Lk. 12:35-38; 14:15-24) as well as John's imagery about the wedding supper of the Lamb (Rv. 19:7-9). Jesus' references to the "feast of the kingdom of God" are also based upon this passage (Mt. 8:11; Lk. 13:29). Paul partially quotes this passage when he declares that at the second coming of Christ "death will be swallowed up in victory"

the world system than it is of Babylon on the Euphrates.

<sup>59</sup>Most interpreters view the singers as depicting the remnant who will survive. However, some see them as offering premature songs of deliverance since more judgment is to follow, cf. G. Robinson and R. Harrison, *ISBE* (1982) 2.889.

<sup>60</sup>A recurring theme in various poetic Old Testament passages is that the powers of evil are headed up under a monster. The reader will meet this primeval dragon in 27:1 as Leviathan, the "gliding, coiling serpent." Here, in 24:21, the reader meets the dragon's cohorts, spiritual powers among "the hosts of heaven" (cf. Job 9:13; Ps. 82:1, 5-8; 89:10; 1 Kg. 22:19-23). In the New Testament, St. Paul will call these same forces the "spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms" (cf. Ep. 6:12), while in the Apocalypse of John they are the "stars" of the heavens, the angels of the Great Red Dragon (Rv. 12:4a, 7-9).

(1 Co. 15:54). Finally, John draws from this passage in his final vision when he says that God will "wipe every tear from their eyes" (Rv. 21:4).

The final part of this vision revisits the devastation of God's enemies when he invades history. Moab will be as helpless as straw in manure (25:10-11a). The proud will be laid low (25:11b-12)!

### **The Song of Judah (26)**

Judah now joins Isaiah's song of praise, and the citizens of Jerusalem rejoice that the holy city will be saved in spite of the vicissitudes of history (26:1-6). Of course, in the New Testament the Jerusalem in view is no longer the ancient city of David on the hill Ophel, but the new Jerusalem coming down from God out of heaven (cf. Ga. 4:25-26; Rv. 21:2ff.). Jerusalem as God's impregnable city is a theme in the psalms as well (cf. Ps. 46:1-7; 48:1-14; 125:1-2). In the meantime, however, God's people face some very dark days, a time of waiting and praying for God's future salvation and judgment (26:7-11).

During the present time, a remnant of God's people continue to serve him faithfully, even though other forces are exerted against them (26:12-13).<sup>61</sup> Whatever the forces that may have oppressed them, such forces were always subject to God's judgment (26:14). In the end, God's purposes would not be thwarted, and he would enlarge the nation of his elect (26:15). Under the hand of God's discipline, his people would be like a woman trying but unable to give birth. God's purpose for them from the beginning had been to bring blessing to the nations (cf. Ge. 12:1-3; 18:18; 22:18; 26:4), but instead of giving birth to this blessing of salvation, they only broke wind (26:16-18). The blessing of salvation to the whole earth would be realized, not by Israel's feeble efforts, but by an act of God who would raise his appointed children from the dead (26:19; cf. Da. 12:2-3). In the meantime, the faithful must patiently wait for God's judgments to be poured out upon the nations because of their oppression and bloodshed (26:20-21).

### **The Restoration (27)**

Once more, Isaiah picks up the phrase "in that day" (cf. 2:2, 11-12, 17, 20, etc.), a reference to the Day of Yahweh. Yahweh will finally destroy the dragon Leviathan, the monster of the sea whom John calls "that ancient serpent called the Devil and Satan" (27:1; cf. Rv. 12:9, 12; 20:1-3, 7-10).<sup>62</sup> If the nation Israel had

<sup>61</sup>Perhaps this passage lies behind Paul's statement, "For even if there are so-called gods, whether in heaven or on earth...yet for us there is but one God" (1 Co. 8:6).

<sup>62</sup>A number of Old Testament and Apocalyptic passages employ the mythological imagery of a dragonlike creature who opposes God. The monster is variously called *Leviathan* (Job 3:8; 41:1; Ps. 74:14; Is. 27:1; cf. 2 Esdras 6:49, 52), *Behemoth* (Job 40:15-24; cf. 1 Enoch 60:7-9; 4 Ezra 6:49-52), *Rahab* (Job 9:13; 26:12; Ps. 89:10; Is. 30:7; 51:9), *Tannin* (= dragon, Job 7:12; Ps. 74:13; Is. 27:1; 51:9), *Yam* (= Sea, Job 7:12; Ps. 74:13; Is. 51:10; Hab. 3:8),

been a vineyard that produced only hard, sour grapes in the past (cf. 5:1-2), a condition that resulted in the vineyard being given over to briars and thorns (cf. 5:3-6), in the future the vineyard would be divinely protected and cultivated (27:2-4). Even the enemies of Judah, the briars and thorns which once ravaged her land, would be offered conditions of peace from the Lord (27:5). Israel, the vineyard of Yahweh, would fulfill her destiny of bringing blessing to the nations. She would fill the world with her bounty (27:6)!

Before the blessing, however, would come judgment. War and exile were in the near future for Israel (27:8). Yet, would this judgment be of the same kind which God leveled against Israel's enemies (27:7)? No, because God's judgment upon Israel was a discipline to remove from the nation her idolatry and sin (27:9). Consequently, the people and the land would be devastated (27:10-11). Yet judgment would be only a prelude to blessing. In the end, God would treat the whole land of Israel as a ripened grain field ready for harvest (27:12). With a trumpet call, the ones exiled in Assyria and Egypt would be joined together in worship on holy Mt. Zion in Jerusalem (27:13). In the New Testament, the trumpet blowing for the return of the exiles becomes the trump of God which will summon God's elect (Mt. 24:31) and those saints who died in faith (1 Co. 15:51-57; 1 Th. 4:16). It is clear that Paul has Isaiah's apocalypse in mind, for he quotes the line, "Death has been swallowed up" (25:8; 1 Co. 15:54b). Mt. Zion, in the Apocalypse of John, is no longer earthly Jerusalem (Rv. 11:8) but the heavenly city (Rv. 14:1; 21:2).

Many of the images from Isaiah's apocalypse have found their way into the New Testament and its theology: the plagues of judgment on the earth, the waiting period for God's people until the woes of judgment are past, the songs of the redeemed as they anticipate God's finale, the destruction of the Great Dragon, the blessing of the messianic banquet, the abolition of death, the resurrection of the dead, and finally, the trumpet of God calling his people to worship in the holy city. What Isaiah described in germ, the Spirit would expand through the apostles and disciples of Jesus.

## Two Kingdoms Under Judgment (Is. 28-33)

The very nature of Israel's covenant faith had provided the nation with a sense of destiny as the people of God. It was the common expectation that God would protect, bless and establish his chosen people in their land forever. The popular notion, if we can borrow the language of the New Testament, was that the kingdom

*Nahar* (= River, Ps. 93:3; Hab. 3:8) and *Nahash* (= Snake, Job 26:13; Is. 27:1), cf. M. Horsnell, *ISBE* (1986) 3.459; H. Gunkel, "Influence of Babylonian Mythology Upon the Creation Story," *Creation in the Old Testament*, ed. B. Anderson (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984) 35-40.

of Israel was the kingdom of God. Even though the Davidic kingdom split into two smaller kingdoms, Ephraim and Judah, each nation in its own way believed in its destiny as the people of God. The northern nation relied on the covenant God made with Abraham, while the southern nation relied on the covenant God made with David. Neither nation, however, sufficiently took into account the covenant God made with Moses. The covenant of Torah was highly conditional, and the primary condition was covenant faithfulness on the part of Israel, God's vassal. God himself could be counted on to be faithful, but would the nation fulfill its part? As the history in the Books of Kings and Chronicles bears out, neither nation was faithful to the covenant of Torah, so both Ephraim and Judah were kingdoms under judgment. It could be no other way, else God would be unfaithful to himself and the word he had given to Moses.

This next collection of oracles spells out the nature of God's judgment against both Ephraim and Judah. The oracles are punctuated with the repetitious "woe": woe to Ephraim (28:1), woe to Jerusalem (29:1), woe to God's stubborn children (30:1), woe to the ones who seek help from Egypt (30:1), and woe to the Assyrian destroyer (33:10). Each nation would suffer the judgment of God within history, yet for each there was hope beyond judgment as well. The failure of the two nations did not constitute the failure of God's promises. Judgment was coming, but it was not God's final word! It was God's strange but necessary therapy before the gift of salvation (28:21).

### **Judgment on Ephraim (28)**

The first woe is leveled against Samaria, the "wreath" of Ephraim (28:1). It was a city of drunkards and revelers. Extending this metaphor of the wreath, Isaiah warns that the flowers of the wreath will be struck by a mighty storm with hail, rain and wind (28:2-3). The flowers of the wreath will disappear as quickly as one eats a ripe fig (28:4). Still, a remnant will survive, and to this remnant a new and enduring wreath would be given. It would no longer be the ancient city of Samaria, but instead, it would be Yahweh himself who would rule and protect his people (28:5-6).

In the meantime, however, conditions were ripe for judgment. Those who should have been spiritual leaders, the priests and prophets, were drunk like everyone else. They had visions, but their visions were the hallucinations of alcohol (28:7-8, 1, 3). Prophetic communication was no more than gibberish (28:9-10).<sup>63</sup> It

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<sup>63</sup>The antecedents of the pronouns in the questions of 28:9, "To whom does he teach knowledge to whom does he explain a message?", are unclear in the Hebrew text. Do they refer to Isaiah himself or to the drunken prophet? Either Isaiah is trying to teach, but his hearers are so befuddled that his message seems like gibberish, or else, the drunken prophets are so confused with alcohol that their messages are like gibberish. In either case, the condition is deplorable!

was like baby-talk (28:10).<sup>64</sup> Therefore, since the people could not (or would not) understand God's message, God now would speak to them more plainly in the savage language of the Assyrians (28:11)! The foreign tongue of invaders, in fact, was precisely what the Deuteronomic code had threatened (cf. Dt. 28:49).<sup>65</sup> The very people who had been promised the land of Canaan as a resting place (cf. Dt. 12:9-10; cf. 25:19) had refused to listen to God. They had allowed his word to become nothing but gibberish (28:12-13a). Consequently, their future was judgment within history (28:13b).

If this was the future for northern Israel, then the people in Judah had better listen well! The leaders in Jerusalem felt secure because of their coalitions with neighbors. Whatever happened in the north, they believed disaster would not touch them. Who their allies were, Isaiah does not say, but he does satirize the coalition as a "covenant with death" (28:14-15). It was folly to depend upon such political maneuvering. The only solid defense against Assyria was the tested stone in Zion--the Rock laid by God himself (28:16; cf. 8:14)! What or who was this Stone? The New Testament writers were in no doubt--it was the Messiah who was both the Stone of stumbling as well as the Stone of security (cf. Ro. 9:33; 10:11; 1 Pe. 2:4-6). As for Judah's political posturing, her self-made security would be swept away (28:17-19). It was too little, too late (28:20). God would now perform his "strange therapy" of judgment, just as he once did in the days of Joshua and David (28:21-22; cf. Jos. 10:1-10; 2 Sa. 5:17-25).<sup>66</sup>

Isaiah closes the oracle with a farming parable. Farmers do not plow forever; they also plant a wide variety of crops (28:23-25)! The art of farming is God's gift (28:26). Similarly, there is a wide variety of techniques for harvesting and threshing (28:27). Yet, even threshing does not continue indefinitely, for the grain must be ground into flour, and flour will never be produced by a threshing cart and horses

<sup>64</sup>The Hebrew *tsaw latsaw tsaw latsaw qaw laqaw qaw laqaw* is virtually nonsensical. Most scholars take the words to be a mockery against the gibberish of either the wine-sodden prophets described in 28:7 or the drunken people trying to mimic Isaiah's words. A number of suggestions for translation have been made, including the ideas that 1) the words are a type of onomatopoeia, 2) that they are the meaningless words with which children are taught to walk, 3) that they are the babyish teaching of the Hebrew alphabet, or 4) that they are a string of nonsensical verbiage approximating the English, "Burble, burble." The NEB offers the dynamic equivalence, "It is all harsh cries and raucous shouts," which strictly is no translation at all. Some scholars only transliterate the words without attempting any English equivalents, cf. Watts, 359, 361. The NIV footnote is quite appropriate when it says the sounds are "probably meaningless sounds; perhaps a mimicking of the prophet's words" (loc cit).

<sup>65</sup>The Pentecostal-Charismatic interpretation that 28:11 is a prediction of tongues-speaking in the New Testament can only be regarded as a mistake. To be sure, St. Paul quotes this passage in the New Testament (cf. 1 Co. 14:21), but he mentions it in order to caution the Corinthians that foreign tongues, like here, are not necessarily a sign of God's approving presence. Sometimes, and this time in particular, they are signs of God's judgment to those who refuse to believe (1 Co. 14:22a).

<sup>66</sup>The point of these two allusions is the mysteriousness of God's work, which in the one was a "confusion" and the other a "sound in the tops of the balsam trees."

(28:28)! The knowledge that enables the farmer to produce food through all these processes is God-given (28:29). In a similar way, the people of Israel must understand that they, too, are in God's process. What he intends to make of them requires different treatments--some of them severe--but all of them necessary!

### **Judgment on Jerusalem (29)**

If judgment was coming to Samaria in Ephraim, it was no less true that it was coming to Jerusalem, too! It is clear that Jerusalem is in view because of the references to the City of David (29:1) and Mt. Zion (29:8). The name *Ariel* (29:1, 2, 7), however, is less clear. The Hebrew word refers to either an altar hearth or an altar of burnt offering. The most probable meaning is that Jerusalem, because of the temple, is the site of many burnt offerings. This city, once under siege by David, would now be under siege by God (29:1-4). Though her citizens might think that the city was exempt and that the annual cycles of years and festivals would never be interrupted, in fact God himself would move against the city (29:1b). Nevertheless, the enemies of Jerusalem would also come under judgment, for God would blow them away like chaff (29:5-6). The nations' control over Jerusalem would be no more enduring than a dream (29:7-8).

God's future for Jerusalem was hidden from the popular court prophets, however (cf. 28:7). It was as if they were blind, drunk or asleep (29:9-10). The message was as obscure to them as though sealed in a scroll or presented to one who could not read (29:11-12). Jerusalem's citizens were no more perceptive. They performed the rituals of religion without any true relationship with God (29:13). But the future God had planned for Jerusalem would stun its citizens (29:14-15)! Like a potter, God was working the clay to his own purposes (29:16). Judgment was coming from the north (29:17), and only after it came would the full intent of God's design be known. There was hope beyond judgment (29:18-21). Centuries earlier, God had rescued Abraham from Mesopotamia; now, he would redeem Abraham's descendants (29:22-24)!

### **God's Future for His Stubborn Children (30)**

As in the beginning of the book (cf. 1:2), the Israelites were depicted as God's stubborn children. Here, they still are rebels, for they planned without consulting the Lord (30:1), and sought help from Pharaoh instead of God (30:2). If Ahaz' temptation had been to join the Syro-Ephraimite alliance against Assyria (cf. 7:1ff.), Hezekiah's temptation was to join an Egyptian coalition against Assyria (cf. 18:1ff.). Such political alliances were no substitute for seeking God's help, however (30:3; cf. 28:14-22)! Earlier, Egypt had sent envoys to Judah to secure a relationship (cf. 18:2), and now Judah had sent envoys back to Egypt packing rich gifts through the southern desert on an expensive, dangerous trip (30:4-7). All such efforts would be

futile. Egypt may have had the reputation of a dragon, but she was only the "Dragon Do-Nothing" (Moffat).

In spite of Isaiah's warnings, the people of Jerusalem maintained their obstinacy. They were rebellious and deceitful (30:8-9), and they squelched any prophetic message that offered warning (30:10-11). In the end, they would collapse like a mud wall and shatter like a dropped clay pot (30:12-14). God's message had been that they should maintain quiet faith and trust in him (cf. 7:9b; 8:6), but this was not good enough for the Jerusalemites (30:15). Instead, forgetting their own best ideals (cf. Ps. 20:7), they demanded the reassurance of conventional military power, and in the end, they would be devastated (30:16-17). How distressing these rebellious children must have been to their divine parent who longed to extend grace and compassion but was thwarted at every attempt (30:18). So, judgment was coming!

After judgment, however, would come salvation and blessing! The grief of the past would be gone, and clear instruction from the Lord would attend their every step (30:19-22; cf. 11:9b; 25:8). The land would be refreshed with rain and fertility, the sun would shine brightly, and God would heal the wounds of the past (30:23-26). God's great day was coming, and when it came he would shake the nations, shattering the Assyrian war machine while his people rejoiced in their salvation (30:27-33).

### **The Folly of Trusting in Egypt (31)**

Isaiah has already called attention to Judah's temptation to seek military assistance from Egypt (cf. 18:1-2; 30:2). Now, he will issue a stern warning against such action, for such political posturing was really unfaithfulness to Yahweh (31:1). Judah looked to Egypt as a wise and powerful ally, but the people had forgotten that God was even more wise and more powerful (31:2-3a). If Judah became an ally of Egypt, God would destroy them both together (31:3)! Any real safety would come from God, not from Egypt, and if only they would trust in him, he would no more abandon them than a lion would abandon its prey or birds their young (31:4-5a). As he once did in the exodus, God would "pass over" Jerusalem and save it from the destroyer (31:5b; cf. Ex. 12:13).

The Israelites needed to return to God, for the day was coming when God would destroy the Assyrian war machine (31:6-9). Assyria would fall, not because of Egyptian cavalry, but because God was the divine warrior. He alone was able to protect the sacrificial fires of his altar in Jerusalem!

## God's Plan for the Future (32)

Isaiah now interrupts his oracles of woe with a vision of God's ultimate future. Judgment is not God's final word, but what God intends beyond judgment is the messianic kingdom, when a king would reign in righteousness (32:1).<sup>67</sup> In that time, the citizens would find protection (32:2), and the closed minds of the spiritually dull would be opened (32:2-8; cf. 6:9-10).

The righteous kingdom would not appear immediately, however. First, there would be severe judgment, for disaster was barely a year away (32:9-10).<sup>68</sup> The women of Jerusalem must not depend upon a false sense of security, for the city would be ravaged (32:11-14). The devastation of Jerusalem would continue a long time until the outpouring of the messianic gift of the Spirit (32:15). Only then would fertility, justice, peace and blessing be given in abundance to the remnant (32:16-20).

## The Destruction of the Destroyer (33)

If this oracle reflects upon the deliverance of Jerusalem in 701 B.C., then the "destroyer" is Sennacherib and the Assyrian army. So far, the Assyrians had been successful everywhere (cf. 36:18-20), but now they would meet God, their destroyer (33:1).

The prayer for deliverance may well reflect the prayers of the citizens of Jerusalem when the city was put under siege (33:2-6; cf. 30:19). The situation had been desperate. The soldiers were terrified, and the arbitrators had failed (33:7). The city was cut off from all help, because Judah had broken her vassal treaty with Assyria (33:8-9). But desperate circumstances were the perfect setting for divine intervention. God determined to act in behalf of the city, and the plans of Sennacherib would be like straw in the fire (33:10-12).

In the midst of such a divine reprieve, a rhetorical question similar to Psalm 15 is posed: "Who can stand in Yahweh's presence" (33:13-14)? The answer, of course, is that the righteous, those who have kept God's laws, can do so (33:15-16). Those who have been delivered can rejoice in the rescue of their king while pondering the fall of the foreign army (33:17-19). God had saved the city! Jerusalem, unlike many ancient cities, was not built upon a river, but now the city would be blessed with broad rivers which would never see the threat of the war galley (33:20-22). In view of this exalted language about the king and the city of

<sup>67</sup>Many interpreters are reluctant to give this oracle full messianic force, preferring instead to interpret it as a wisdom ideal at the coronation of Hezekiah or even Josiah (the latter viewpoint, of course, denying Isaiah's authorship). While it is possible that the oracle might have had an historic framework, the messianic overtones should not be discounted.

<sup>68</sup>It seems probably that this oracle anticipates the invasion of Sennacherib in 701 B.C.

Jerusalem, it is hard not to believe that Isaiah's words have powerful messianic overtones which find fulfillment in the New Jerusalem (cf. Rev. 19:16; 22:1-2).

Assyria, for its part, was like a war galley in tatters (33:23a). Jerusalem had been saved, and her sins had been forgiven (33:23b-24)!

### **The Little Apocalypse (Is. 34-35)**

This section, called the "little apocalypse" to distinguish it from the apocalypse in chapters 24-27, consists of two poems. Like the earlier apocalypse, this vision contains the cosmic imagery of judgment, and as is typical of Isaiah, it depicts judgment first, salvation later. The first oracle pronounces doom for all the nations (34:2), but especially for Edom (34:5-6). The second describes the wonders of restoration after judgment is past (35:1ff.).

The scene is set with the nations being summoned to God's divine court (34:1). The nations of the world were to be sentenced to execution, and the whole universe would be dissolved (34:2-4). God's divine sword of execution was like the sword descending upon a sacrifice, and this time, the sacrifice was the land of Edom and its capital Bozrah (34:5-7). Edom, like Babylon, had become a symbol of all the nations who stood in defiance of God. No doubt the long-standing feud between Judah and Edom contributed to such an image. God would defend holy Mt. Zion, the place and people he had chosen as his own, and Edom would burn forever like fire in a tar pit (34:8-10). The land of Edom would be desolated and left to the wild animals (34:11-15). That the land of Edom had been given over to the animal kingdom was recorded in the Book of Life (cf. Ps. 139:16; Da. 12:1; Mal. 3:16).

Judgment has its proper contrast with restoration, however! If God was coming to execute the defiant, he also was coming to save his people. When he came, the parched desert would burst into fruitfulness at the presence of his glory (35:1-2). The people of faith must take courage, for the promise of God's coming to avenge and save his persecuted people was certain (35:3-4). Restoration would abound for both humans and their land (35:5-7). In the restoration, the Road of Holiness would lead the redeemed people of the God into Zion, where they would fill the city with their joyful songs (35:8-10).

Obviously, the images of judgment (34:3; cf. Rv. 14:20), universal cataclysm (34:4; cf. Rv. 6:13), the New Zion (35:10; Rv. 14:1) and the highway to the New Jerusalem (35:8-10; cf. Rv. 22:14) in the Apocalypse of John owe much to Isaiah's "little apocalypse." However, not only in the futuristic eschatology of John, but also in the realized eschatology of other New Testament voices one finds allusions to Isaiah's vision. Jesus alluded to it in his message to the imprisoned John the Baptist that in his messianic ministry the blind, deaf, lame and dumb were being healed (35:5-6; cf. Lk. 7:22). The writer of Hebrews challenges Christians, as the new people of faith, to strengthen the feeble arms and knees (35:3; He. 12:12-13).

## Historical Postscript (Is. 36-39)

The final section of Isaiah 1-39 which relates to the pre-exilic citizens of Judah is a near duplication of 2 Kings 18-20. In fact, so close is the language between the two scrolls that a literary dependency between them is virtually certain. Scholars who argue for a late redaction (or even a late composition) of much of the book generally suppose that the Kings record is earlier,<sup>69</sup> but there are arguments the other way as well.<sup>70</sup> The circumstances of chapters 36-37 can be dated to 701 B.C., the year of Sennacherib's siege against Jerusalem. Corroborating material exists from the prism of Sennacherib, where he describes the "terror-inspiring glamour" of his victories over Phoenicia, Philistia, Moab, the chariot corps of Egypt and the cavalry of Ethiopia, all of which were probably allies in an anti-Assyrian coalition. Concerning Hezekiah of Jerusalem, Sennacherib recorded the following:

*As to Hezekiah, the Jew, he did not submit to my yoke, I laid siege to 46 of his strong cities, walled forts and to the countless small villages in their vicinity, and conquered (them) by means of well-stamped (earth-)ramps and battering-rams brought (thus) near (to the walls) (combined with) the attack by foot soldiers, (using) mines, breeches as well as sapper work. I drove out (of them) 200,150 people, young and old, male and female, horses, mules, donkeys, camels, big and small cattle beyond counting, and considered (them) booty. Himself I made a prisoner in Jerusalem, his royal residence, like a bird in a cage. I surrounded him with earthwork in order to molest those who were leaving his city's gate. His towns which I had plundered, I took away from his country and gave them (over) to Mitinti, king of Ashdod, Padi, king of Ekron, and Sillibel, king of Gaza. Thus I reduced his country, but I still increased the tribute and the katu-presents (due) to me (as his) overlord which I imposed (later) upon him beyond the former tribute, to be delivered annually. Hezekiah himself, whom the terror-inspiring splendor of my lordship had overwhelmed and whose irregular and elite troops which he had brought into Jerusalem, his royal residence, in order to strengthen (it), had deserted him, did send me, later, to Nineveh, my lordly city, together with 30 talents of gold, 800 talents of silver, precious stones, antimony, large cuts of red stone, couches (inlaid) with ivory, nimedu-chairs (inlaid) with ivory, elephant-hides, ebony-wood,*

<sup>69</sup>For this position, see O. Eissfeldt, *The Old Testament: An Introduction*, trans. P. Ackroyd (New York: Harper & Row, 1965) 328-329. Those who follow this lead also argue that chapters 36-39 were intentionally inserted between the so-called First Isaiah (chapters 1-35) and Second Isaiah (chapters 40-66) so as to anticipate the Babylonian exile which chapters 40-66 assume. Thus, chapters 36-39 are believed to provide a metaphorical role on the death and rebirth of the nation, cf. B. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979) 332-333.

<sup>70</sup>E. Young, II.556-565. It is worth pointing out, however, that both those who give priority to Isaiah as well as those who give priority to 2 Kings agree that these chapters function as a bridge between what precedes and what follows. E. J. Young, who defends the priority of Isaiah, still titles the section, "The Connecting Bridge Between Chapters 1-35 and 40-66 (36-39)," E. Young, II.457. As such, chapters 36-37 look backward to the Assyrian Period while chapters 38-39 look forward to the rise of Babylon.

*boxwood (and) all kinds of valuable treasures, his (own) daughters, concubines, male and female musicians. In order to deliver the tribute and do obeisances as a slave he sent his (personal) messenger.*<sup>71</sup>

The details of tribute provided by Sennacherib correlate closely with the record in 2 Kings 18:14-16.

### **The Siege of Jerusalem (36-37)**

Hezekiah was very different from his vacillating father. When he ascended to the throne, he began immediate religious reforms by removing the idolatrous images from Jerusalem (2 Kg. 18:1-4). Though Judah had been in a vassal relationship with Assyria since Ahaz had invited Tiglath-Pileser III into Palestine (2 Kg. 16:7ff.), Hezekiah rebelled against the Assyrian overlord (2 Kg. 18:5-8). As was to be expected, the Assyrian suzerain moved against Judah to punish this insolence, capturing all Judah's fortified cities (2 Kg. 18:13ff.), and putting Jerusalem under siege.<sup>72</sup> In typical Assyrian fashion, the field commander informed Hezekiah that his dependence upon Egyptian support was ill-founded (36:2-6). In view of Hezekiah's obvious lack of cavalry, the commander offered to "spot" him 2000 horses and crush him anyway (36:8-9)! His opinion of Yahweh was no better, and he even insinuated that Hezekiah's purge of the Canaanite shrines had angered Yahweh, and now, Yahweh was siding with the Assyrians (36:7, 10). It was surely more than incidental that the site of this challenge was the very same as the one where Isaiah had charged Hezekiah's father to stand firm in his faith (7:3; 36:2)!

Hezekiah's delegation was alarmed that the Assyria field commander issued his challenge in Hebrew, and requested that the exchange be conducted in Aramaic, the diplomatic language of the Fertile Crescent (36:11). But the field commander knew the value of intimidation, and he determined to use it to full advantage (36:12). He arrogantly dismissed Hezekiah's rebellion as doomed to certain failure, and he ridiculed the power of Yahweh to prevent the inevitable collapse of

<sup>71</sup>J. Pritchard, ed., *The Ancient Near East: An Anthology of Texts and Pictures* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University, 1958) I.200-201.

<sup>72</sup>Based on Assyrian bas-reliefs and inscriptions, conquering a fortified city consisted of penetrating the wall. This was accomplished either by scaling it, breaching it with battering rams, often by building a siege ramp, or penetrating the gate (which often was the weakest point in fortification). If these methods were not feasible, the wall might tunneled under or the city put to siege, the latter consisting of cutting off all food and water supply. A siege could take several months or even years, cf. E. Bleibtreu, "Five Ways to Conquer a City," *BAR* (May/June 1990) 36-44. Lachish, the second most important city in Judah which was destroyed just before Sennacherib put Jerusalem to siege, was attacked by building a siege ramp. The Judeans inside Lachish built a counter-ramp inside the wall to shore it up, cf. H. Shanks, "Destruction of Judean Fortress Portrayed in Dramatic Eighth-Century B.C. Pictures," and D. Ussishkin, "Defensive Judean Counter-Ramp Found at Lachish in 1983 Season," *BAR* (March/April 1984) 48-65, 66-73.

Jerusalem (36:13-20). The people of Jerusalem remained frozen in silence, and Hezekiah's delegation reported back to him the Assyrian terms (36:21-22). In acute distress, Hezekiah sent for Isaiah (37:1-4). As he had done before, Isaiah calmed the king and encouraged him to trust in Yahweh (37:5-7; cf. 7:4-9). Yahweh declared that the Assyrian commander would be compelled to withdraw and return to Mesopotamia.

In the meantime, Sennacherib determined to bring the Jerusalem siege to a quick end, since the Ethiopian cavalry were moving northward and he could not afford to engage on both fronts (37:9-13). So, he wrote a threatening letter to Hezekiah in hopes that the Judean king would simply capitulate without a fight. Hezekiah received the letter in great distress. He took it to the temple and spread it out before Yahweh in prayer (37:14-20).

The answer to Hezekiah's prayer came through Isaiah, who sent word to Hezekiah that Sennacherib's threat would surely fail. He had challenged the God of Israel, and the God of Israel would send the Assyrian warlord home the way he came (37:21-29)! Just as Isaiah had given Ahaz a sign, so now he gave Hezekiah one. The sign was that a remnant would survive this trauma and live on the aftergrowth of the farms for two years without having to cultivate the land (37:30-32). Sennacherib could not force his way into Jerusalem, because it would be defended by Yahweh (37:33-35)!

The story reaches its climax when the angel of death, who once struck the firstborn of Egypt, now struck 185,000 Assyrian soldiers,<sup>73</sup> and Sennacherib abruptly withdrew to Nineveh (37:36-37).<sup>74</sup> Even there, he did not escape the avenging hand of Yahweh, for he was cut down in a successful assassination attempt by two of his own sons (37:38).<sup>75</sup>

### **The Last Years of Hezekiah (38-39)**

Chapter 38 of Isaiah recounts the sickness and healing of Hezekiah. Other than the psalm in 38:9-20, the passage is parallel to 2 Kings 20:1-12. The nature of Hezekiah's illness is not stated, except that it involved a boil or inflammation (possibly small pox or leprosy).<sup>76</sup> God sent Isaiah to the king to announce his imminent death (38:1). For his part, Hezekiah was not ready to die, and in answer to

<sup>73</sup>A romantic but moving account of God's intervention to save Jerusalem is found in Lord Byron's (1788-1824) classic poem "Destruction of the Assyrians."

<sup>74</sup>According to the ancient Greek historian Herodotus (5th century B.C.), during the Palestinian campaign the Assyrian camp was infested with mice (or rats) which destroyed the arrows and shield-thongs of the soldiers, but whether this account has any direct connection with the biblical story is uncertain.

<sup>75</sup>Assyrian texts corroborate this murder, Watts, 47.

<sup>76</sup>W. Holladay, A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971) 366; BDB, 1006.

his prayer for help, Isaiah returned with the announcement that God had given him another fifteen years (38:2-5, 21-22). Just as important, Jerusalem would be spared from Assyrian aggression, and Hezekiah would not be taken captive to Nineveh (38:6). As a sign, God promised to make the shadow on the sundial move backward ten steps.<sup>77</sup> The Kings record also points out that Hezekiah was given the choice as to which way the shadow would move (2 Kg. 20:9-11).

In retrospect, Hezekiah composed a psalm. In it, he voiced his distress over the prospect of an early death (38:9-14), and later, his appreciation for the added years to his life (38:15-20).

The closing episode of Hezekiah's life and Isaiah's ministry calls attention to the rise of Babylon, the empire that would engulf Assyria and bring Jerusalem and Judah into exile. Merodach-Baladan, a Babylonian tribal chief, led a rebellion against Sargon after the Assyrians had destroyed Samaria and the northern kingdom of Israel in 722-1 B.C. With the help of the Elamites, he took the title King of Babylon, was later expelled by Sargon, and still later came back to power during the reign of Sennacherib. His envoy to Hezekiah was ostensibly to congratulate Hezekiah on his recovery, but more probably, it was to gauge the likelihood of support from Palestine should he make an effort against Assyria (39:1-2). In any case, Hezekiah received the envoy graciously and openly. When Isaiah heard that his king had openly displayed the royal archives and treasury, he pronounced future doom upon Judah. It would be Babylon, not Assyria, that would sack Jerusalem and carry her nobles and citizens into exile (39:3-7; cf. 2 Kg. 20:12-18). Hezekiah acknowledged that God's judgment was just, and he expressed thankfulness that he had been spared the final blow during his own lifetime (39:8).

## **The Consolation of Israel (Isaiah 40-66)**

### **Introduction**

Possibly no section of the Old Testament has attracted more attention than the latter chapters of the Book of Isaiah. Theologically, this section of the Old Testament is as significant as Paul's Epistle to the Romans in the New Testament. At center stage is the enigmatic and compelling figure of Yahweh's Servant, one who was called by God to suffer vicariously for the sins of others.

The context of this revelation is the terrible tragedy of Judah's exile to Babylon. The citizens of the southern nation had lost their capital, their king, their

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<sup>77</sup>The Qumran scrolls (1QIsa) clarify that what is in view here is not a conventional circular sundial but a series of steps constructed so that the sun's shadow moving along the steps could be used to measure time, cf. D. McCarthy, S.J., *JBC* (1968) I.252.

land, their temple and their future. Had God forsaken them? Was there any hope? This theological and political crisis became the setting for the moving and powerful promises which shaped the entire character of the messianic hope and, indeed, the New Testament itself. It is no accident that the haunting announcement by Yahweh in the Book of Consolation, "Here is my Servant" (Is. 42:1), is answered with an equally startling announcement from heaven in the gospels, "This is my Son" (Mt. 3:17//Mk. 1:11//Lk. 3:22). It is this same section of Old Testament prophecy that the Ethiopian was reading when Philip confronted him in the Gaza desert (Is. 53). The Ethiopian asked, "Who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?" Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus (Ac. 8:26-35).

The focused attention given to the latter sections of the Book of Isaiah, however, have not been due solely to its messianic significance. A serious scholarly debate has been waged for the past two centuries over the unity of the Book of Isaiah. Was this book written by a single author, as traditionally believed by both Christians and Jews? Was there a later editor? What is the literary history of the book? The preponderance of biblical scholars now agree that the book was written by two or more authors, the traditional Isaiah of the eighth century B.C. (chapters 1-39) and Deutero-Isaiah<sup>78</sup> of the Babylonian captivity in the sixth century B.C. (chapters 40-55). Still further debate has arisen concerning Isaiah 56-66, some scholars including it within the corpus of Deutero-Isaiah and others opting for yet a third author, Trito-Isaiah.<sup>79</sup> Also, many scholars allow for some amount of editing by still a later hand.

Conservatives have not been slow to react to this hypothesis. While conservative scholars have not been disturbed unduly about suggestions for multiple authorship in the anonymous books of the Old Testament, such as Judges and 1 Samuel,<sup>80</sup> the case for Isaiah was different. Here, the issue was that writers in the

<sup>78</sup>Sometimes also called Second Isaiah or Isaiah of Babylon

<sup>79</sup>Or, Third Isaiah

<sup>80</sup>Some Old Testament books are even explicitly produced at the hand of more than one person, i.e., the Book of Jeremiah seems to have included a biographical section (Je. 26-45) written in the third person, probably by Baruch, who served as Jeremiah's secretary for dictation (Je. 36:4, 27-28, 32; 45:1). Furthermore, some Old Testament books made use of existing material and included this material in the final form of the biblical book, thus making the final product the work of more than one author (cf. Nu. 21:14-15; Jos. 10:13; 1 Kg. 11:41).

Some books that were originally a unity in the Hebrew Bible have been later divided, as in the case of 1 and 2 Samuel and 1 and 2 Kings, which are also anonymous. In the Hebrew Bible, there is only a single book called Samuel and a single book called Kings. In the LXX these two books were divided into four books, 1, 2, 3 and 4 Kingdoms. In the English Bible, the format of four books is retained but with the titles 1 and 2 Samuel and 1 and 2 Kings. Also, in the Hebrew Bible a single scroll called "The Twelve" was divided into the individual books of the Minor Prophets in the LXX and so passed in this divided form into the English Bible. In general, conservatives have not found any of these rearrangements to be a serious problem, especially where authorship is anonymous.

New Testament specifically attributed sayings in both sections of the book to a single Isaiah (Jn. 12:38-41/Is. 53:1; 6:10 and Mk. 1:2-3/Is. 40:3). Those inclined to attribute the authorship of the Book of Isaiah to more than one writer dismiss the New Testament quotations as simply conventional speech.<sup>81</sup> The conservative response, on the other hand, is quite succinctly summed up by J. Barton Payne, when he says, "The issue is clear: he who is open-minded about accepting the disunity of Isaiah's prophecy is already close-minded against accepting the inerrant authority of John's Gospel, and therefore of Scripture as a whole."<sup>82</sup> Thus, a very painful rift developed, even among fellow evangelicals, over this critical issue.

### **Brief Summary of the Evidence Regarding Authorship**

The material written concerning the authorship of the Book of Isaiah is voluminous.<sup>83</sup> Since the purpose of this study is exegetical and theological, the issue of authorship will only be treated lightly. All scholars agree that Isaiah 40-66 presupposes the Babylonian exile, whether or not the author(s) was standing in the middle of it when he (they) wrote. Thus, a final answer to this critical question is not necessary before one can interpret the book. This is not to say that the question of authorship is irrelevant, but it can be bracketed to a large degree without destroying the hermeneutical effort. The following summary of the evidence accordingly will be brief. The conventional language of "First Isaiah" (1-39) and

<sup>81</sup>Clark Pinnock, for instance, who is himself a moderate scholar, says, "Because Jesus cites....a prophecy from the Book of Isaiah, it does not follow that he is placing his divine authority on the line for the precise literary authorship of those texts," and later, "It is more natural to think that when Jesus cites the Old Testament he does so according to the accepted conventions and not in order to refute some piece of higher critical guesswork," C. Pinnock, *The Scripture Principle* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984) 39.

<sup>82</sup>J. Payne, "Higher Criticism and Biblical Inerrancy," *Inerrancy*, ed. N. Geisler (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1980) 104.

<sup>83</sup>Virtually every treatment of Isaiah is compelled to address this question, ranging from commentaries to articles in Bible dictionaries, not to mention various monographs and articles in scholarly periodicals. In some commentary series, the way in which the commentaries are set up demonstrates a conclusion. For instance, the *New Century Bible Commentary* divides Isaiah into two commentaries, Isaiah 1-39 and Isaiah 40-66, each by different scholars. The same can be said for the *International Theological Commentary Series*, which further divides Deutero-Isaiah into books on Isaiah 40-55 and Isaiah 56-66. In the *Old Testament Library*, one author writes concerning Isaiah 1-39 in two volumes, and another author writes concerning Isaiah 40-66 in yet a third volume. While the *Anchor Bible* has not yet produced a work on Isaiah 1-39, it does have one on Isaiah 40-66. In the *Word Biblical Commentary*, John Watts treats the book as a theological unity, but one which was redacted in the late 5th century B.C. from several earlier authors and sources. More overtly evangelical works, such as *The International Bible Commentary* and *The New Bible Dictionary* (both the 1st and the 2nd editions) seem open to the view of multiple authorship if not advocating it.

On the other hand, older evangelical commentaries, like those by F. Delitzsch and E. J. Young, stoutly maintain the unity of the book. More recently, the commentary in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* by G. Grogan defends the unity of the book, though without necessarily castigating those who might disagree. Articles such as the one by R. Harrison in the new *ISBE* (1982) II.893ff., present fresh defenses of Isaianic unity, taking into account a host of academic factors ranging from the community at Qumran to textual issues.

"Second Isaiah" (40-66) will be used in this summary, not so much to decide the question of authorship, but to refer to the two distinctive sections of the book which are under question.

The challenges to the unity of the book follow along several lines. In the first place, Second Isaiah envisions a new historical situation than does First Isaiah. In chapters 1-39, the historical situation is Judah of the eighth century B.C., threatened, to be sure, by the Mesopotamian empire-builders, but still a national entity with a Davidic king. There, the great enemy is Assyria. In chapter 40 and later, the historical situation is near the end of the Babylonian exile of the Jews, sometime near the close of the sixth century B.C. Assyria has long since passed off of the political landscape, being replaced by Babylon. Here, Jerusalem is in ruins (44:26-28; 49:14-23) and the people are far away from their homeland (43:14; 48:20). Many of the oracles in Second Isaiah seem to be direct responses to statements and complaints by the exiles themselves (e.g., 40:27; 45:9ff.; 49:14). Yet a third world power, Persia, is anticipated, and its leader, Cyrus the Great, already seems to be identifiable (44:28; 45:1, 13). Furthermore, it is not simply that Second Isaiah envisions a different historical circumstance than First Isaiah, but more important, that it views the exile and the destruction of Judah as a past event (40:2; 42:22-25). The exile is not something that is going to happen; it is something that has already happened.

The literary differences between First and Second Isaiah are also significant. The tone of the former, which was pessimistic and condemning, has changed to consolation and vibrant hope. Also, whereas First Isaiah is filled with biographical material about Isaiah himself, Second Isaiah does not even so much as mention his name. First Isaiah seems to have originally ended at Chapter 35, for Chapters 36-39 seem to be a supplementary appendix taken from 2 Kings 18:13--20:19.<sup>84</sup>

Finally, and for some the most important factor of all, the writings in Second Isaiah, which are addressed to the exiles in Babylon in the sixth century B.C., are said to be "new."<sup>85</sup> The exiles plainly are told that they have not heard these things before and that they can never say they knew of them previously (48:6-8). How could this be true if the material had been written two centuries earlier and preserved until the exile?

Against this foregoing "assured result" of modern biblical scholarship stands a virulent defense of the book's unity. The issue of inerrancy has already been mentioned. Since the Book of Isaiah is quoted more in the New Testament than another other single Old Testament document, and since these quotations appear

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<sup>84</sup>It is beyond question that this passage in Isaiah and its parallel in 2 Kings are related, for the one is almost a verbatim replica of the other, except for the psalm attributed to Hezekiah in 38:9-20.

<sup>85</sup>C. North, *IDB* (1962) II.737-738.

from all sections of the book without differentiation, there is substantial reason to think that the New Testament writers, at least, believed the work to have come from a single hand, Isaiah ben Amoz of the eighth century B.C.<sup>86</sup> Could such inspired writers have been wrong in their assumption? Certainly the traditional Jewish opinion was that the book was the work of a single prophet.<sup>87</sup> So also was the opinion of the primitive church.

Answers to the problems raised by those who wished to divide the book were also forthcoming. If Second Isaiah envisions a different historical setting than First Isaiah, this change in viewpoint was possible precisely because the book was prophetic. Even in First Isaiah, the prophet projected himself into the future in order to describe future events as though they had already occurred (5:13-17; 9:1-7; 23:1, 14, 17). If this was possible in the First Isaiah, might not the entire corpus of Second Isaiah be of a similar nature? At a textual level, there are striking verbal agreements between the language of First Isaiah and Second Isaiah as well as significant similarities in thoughts and figures.<sup>88</sup> As to the statement that Second Isaiah was "new" material given to the exiles, it is postulated that during the idolatrous reign of Manasseh, Isaiah may have been unable to function openly as a prophet. His prophetic writings were ongoing, however, and it was within a new situation in Babylonian exile that these writings became significant. Finally, did it not seem absurd to suggest that the greatest of all the Old Testament prophets was unnamed in his own work and apparently unknown by the descendants of the very community to which he preached? In the end, the attempt to divide the book into multiple authors was reduced to the accusation that those who wished to do so were simply offended by the concept of predictive prophecy in the first place. They held a weak view of supernaturalism; therefore, they held a weak view of the unity of Isaiah.<sup>89</sup>

So, where does that leave us? To agree with the critical scholars in their

<sup>86</sup>For a listing of all the Isaianic quotations in the New Testament and the manner in which the quotations are introduced by the New Testament writer, see E. Young, *An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964) 206.

<sup>87</sup>However, it should be mentioned that in the Talmudic traditions, the Book of Isaiah was credited to "Hezekiah and his company," along with Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs. Apparently the earliest Jewish rabbis to question the unity of Isaiah along the lines of modern scholarship were Moses ben Samuel Ibn Gekatilla of the 2nd century A.D., and later, Ibn Ezra (1092-1167 A.D.) of the medieval period. However, the general opinion among Jewry was that the Book of Isaiah came from a single author, Isaiah ben Amoz of the eighth century B.C.

<sup>88</sup>For a listing of these similarities, see R. Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969) 778-779.

<sup>89</sup>This condemnation is particularly evident in such works as that of G. Archer, *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction* (Chicago: Moody, 1974) 329, where the whole examination of Isaianic authorship begins with a statement concerning the growth of late 18th century deism and the development of an anti-supernatural bias. This sets up his conviction that the division of Isaiah arose primarily out of scholarly disbelief in predictive prophecy.

division of the Book of Isaiah is to commit theological suicide in the most conservative circles. On the other hand, to agree with the conservative position that the question of unity is answered in the New Testament before it is fairly addressed in the Old Testament is to commit intellectual suicide in the academic community. There is no way to win in both arenas: one is forced to choose between theological respectability on the one side or academic integrity on the other.<sup>90</sup> Many conservative scholars who attempt to marshal proof for the unity of the book seem to do so out of a conclusion which has been reached before examining the Old Testament evidence. Yet if Second Isaiah were not already attached to First Isaiah in the canon, probably no one would ever think that the two were written by the same author.

I suppose it is fair to ask whether this question of authorship and unity needs to be answered before one can understand the book. Probably not. The issue has devolved into a political battlefield which far outstrips its significance for interpreting the work. In frankness, the present author does not have a firm conclusion, and for some, such ambivalence is little better than arriving at a wrong conclusion. Nevertheless, so be it. A firm conclusion does not seem clear in view of the conflicting evidence. Perhaps some factor or factors will come to light in continued research which will make the answer more clear. This author does conclude that if Jesus or the apostles used conventional language regarding Isaiah as the author of the book, such conventional language does not necessarily call into question their integrity or truthfulness nor does it impinge upon the infallibility of Holy Scripture. The predictive content in both First and Second Isaiah is firmly accepted by this author, regardless of when it was written or by whom. On the other hand, critical scholarship is known for reversing its expert opinions, and it is not impossible that scholars will someday reverse what is the current consensus. In any case, more important than any personal decision regarding the authorship of Isaiah is the affirmation of its canonical status, and therefore, its spiritual authority for those who are Christians. This affirmation is cheerfully and willingly made! For the purpose of this study, the name Isaiah will be used for the author of the whole book, the critical question notwithstanding.

### **The Theological Crisis of the Exile**

When the Kingdom of Judah fell to the Babylonians, with it also fell the hope that it could ever be the kingdom of God (La. 1). The establishment of God's people under God's rule in the land of Palestine necessarily had to be reinterpreted in more spiritual terms if not abandoned altogether.<sup>91</sup> Of course, the prophets had been

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<sup>90</sup>J. Barr, *Beyond Fundamentalism* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984) 156.

<sup>91</sup>J. Bright, *The Kingdom of God* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1953) 127.

preaching this same theme for a long time. Beginning with the writing prophets, these troublers of the nation announced that the people, the land, the cult, and the kings of Israel were facing a most formidable antagonist, and it was none other than Yahweh himself. Amos and Hosea in the north and Isaiah and Micah in the south sent a withering message to their fellow citizens that the kingdoms of Ephraim and Judah were under divine judgment (Am. 2:4-16; Ho. 2:2-13; Is. 3:1--4:1; Mic. 1:2-7). God had revealed his strange plan of judgment to his prophets (Am. 3:7; Ho. 1:2-5, 8-9; Is. 28:21-22; Mic. 3:8).

Of course, such a message was unwelcome. Many if not most Israelites refused to believe it until it was too late. There was a tremendous illusion of security in both the northern and the southern nations. In the north, it was believed that the ancient shrines of the patriarchs would be divinely protected. In the south, the longevity of the nation was believed to be guaranteed, because the people had remained faithful to the dynasty of David with all its associated promises. Against this optimism, however, Amos declared that the shrines in the north were not safe (Am. 5:4-6). In the south, Micah bitterly opposed the voices which guaranteed peace and security (Mic. 2:6-7; 3:9-12). One would have supposed that after the northern nation was crushed by Assyria, just as the prophets had predicted, the southern nation might have been shaken out of her spiritual lethargy. In fact, there were brief periods of spiritual renewal and reform spearheaded by Hezekiah and Josiah (2 Chr. 29-31, 34-35). Such efforts were too little too late, however. The downward course of the nation could not be turned for very long, and when each of these kings died, their reforms quickly disintegrated (2 Kg. 20:21; 21:9; 23:29-32).

Though the brazen and adulterous nation to the north had been divorced by Yahweh for her infidelity, her equally brazen and adulterous sister to the south learned nothing from it (Je. 3:6-11). Because she still maintained the temple on Zion and a Davidic king, she believed that she held a divine guarantee of security. In the 7th century, Zephaniah and Jeremiah thundered out against this false security (Zep. 1:12; Je. 6:14; 8:11). The temple on Zion was no guarantee of anything (Je. 7:4, 9-11, 21-26). The Davidic dynasty could and would be swept away (Je. 22:1-5, 21, 24-30; 36:30-31). To hope for a last minute miracle was utter folly (Je. 21:1-7). In the end, the southern nation collapsed in 587 B.C. (2 Kg. 25).

The bitterness of exile forced the people into a theological crisis. The eternal promises to the house of David (Ps. 89:3-4, 19-37) seemed to have been shattered (Ps. 89:38-51). The exile meant the end of Judah's national existence and the end of all institutions around which corporate life was established.<sup>92</sup> All external marks of

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<sup>92</sup>Nebuchadnezzar destroyed all the fortified cities in Judah. A great portion of the population was lost to war and associated problems. Unlike the Assyrians, the Babylonians did not attempt to replace deported populations with foreign colonists. While Judah's population was probably in the neighborhood of 250,000 in the 8th century B.C.,

unity had been destroyed except for the unity of faith, and this faith was itself under extreme duress. The popular theology had been that the nation was safe because of Yahweh's eternal choice of Zion and the unconditional promises to the dynasty of David. The prophets had been unable to convince the people that this security was a false one, but where the prophets had failed, Nebuchadnezzar's battering rams succeeded! Now, the people of Judah were left with agonizing theological questions. If Yahweh was the God of Israel, how could it be explained that he had allowed Marduk and the gods of Babylon to take his land, burn his temple, desecrate his holy vessels, and deport his people (Is. 59:1-2)? What about the question of justice? Was Yahweh fair in sending judgment upon his own people by the Babylonians, who were even more wicked than the citizens of Judah (Ha. 1:5-2:1)? These kinds of questions threatened a wholesale loss of faith. Direct contact with Babylon's foreign cultures, sophistication and splendor must have made the traditional Israelite culture and the ancient God of Sinai pale by comparison.

Considering the magnitude of the calamity, it is a wonder that the faith of Israel did not die altogether. That it did not die is due almost entirely to the voices of the prophets, which helped the people reinterpret their relationship to Yahweh. Jeremiah, in particular, had answered this theological dilemma in advance. He had preached that the exile was Yahweh's righteous judgment on the nation's sin according to the ancient Deuteronomic code (Je. 9:12-16; 8:13, 20//Dt. 28:18, 22-24; Je. 8:14-17; 9:20-22; 10:22//Dt. 28:25-26; Je. 8:18-19; 9:10-11, 16-19; 10:17-18, 25b//Dt. 28:36, 46-48, 63-64, 68). God had only done what he had promised. The ancient faith was not in itself incorrect, though the popular misconceptions of it must be rejected. In this way, the people in exile were purged and prepared for a new future. Hints of this new future were already given by Isaiah in the 8th century B.C. Though the nation would be returned to slavery, the people would also be returned to God (Is. 10:20-21). Ultimately, God's anger would be turned away from them (Is. 12:1-6). Finally, they would be allowed to return from exile (Is. 1:27; 7:3; 10:22; 35:10).<sup>93</sup> There was indeed a new future for the nation. The nature and range of this new future is at the heart of the message of Second Isaiah.

after the exile in 587 B.C., it was reduced to scarcely 20,000. With the major deportation to Babylon, the center of gravity had temporarily shifted from the homeland, cf. J. Bright, *A History of Israel*, 2nd. ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1972) 344-345.

<sup>93</sup>This message of Isaiah was sharpened by his plays on words. The Hebrew verb *shuv* (= return) is used to refer to the return of the people to slavery through exile, the turning of their hearts back to God, the turning of God's anger away from them, and the eventual return of the remnant to the land. The title which Isaiah gives to the survivors was "the returning ones" (obscured in the NIV by the rendering "penitent ones," Is. 1:27). To further emphasize his message, Isaiah named his son *Shear-Yashuv* (= a remnant will return).

## The Message of Comfort (40-41)

Other than a short epilogue (66:17-24), Second Isaiah is written in the literary style of Hebrew poetry. As such, there is extensive use of parallelism, figures of speech and exalted style.<sup>94</sup> In contrast to the blistering oracles of the pre-exilic prophets, and even in contrast to Isaiah 1-39, this entire corpus of oracles is conciliatory, tender and healing. It begins with the famous lines, "Comfort, comfort, my people!" made even more famous in the English world due to its appearance as the Recitative in Handel's *The Messiah*.

### Comfort to the Exiles (40:1-11)

God's message of comfort was addressed to the last vestiges of Jewish national life--Jerusalem (40:2), Mt. Zion (40:9a) and the towns of Judah (40:9b) that were finally crushed and exiled by the armies of Nebuchadnezzar. Jeremiah had predicted that the judgment of exile would last some seventy years (Je. 25:11-12; 29:10-14).<sup>95</sup> Now the period of judgment was nearing its conclusion. The exiles from Jerusalem had come to the end of their "hard service" in Babylon. The penalty for their national sin had been discharged (40:2). Just as the Deuteronomic Code had promised, the tragedy of exile did not extinguish the hope for restoration (Dt. 30:1-10; 2 Chr. 6:24-31, 36-39).

A voice was calling from the great desert which separated Babylon from Jerusalem (40:3). A returning highway would be built so that once more God could inhabit the holy city. No doubt, the prophet has in mind the earlier journey of Israel through the desert of Sinai. This time, however, the people would journey, not from Egypt to Canaan, but from Babylon to Jerusalem, to the opposite side of the Arabian desert that now separated them from the holy land. God would make the way smooth so that the exiles could effectively make the trek (40:4). The glory of Yahweh, which in Ezekiel's vision had removed itself from the temple of Solomon (Eze. 10), would now return and be revealed to all the nations (40:5).

A second voice now cries out. This voice sharply contrasts the transitory nature of humankind with the enduring Word of Yahweh (40:6-8). If the nation of Judah had wilted like grass before the breath of God, the Babylonians were no different. Only God's Word could be depended upon to stand firm through the ravages of history.

Most important, God's Word to the exiles was one of good news! Mt. Zion,

<sup>94</sup>For an extensive treatment of the literary form of Hebrew poetry, see W. Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poetry* (Sheffield, England: JSOT Press, 1986).

<sup>95</sup>The *terminus a quo* and *terminus ad quem* has been debated, and several options are possible, cf. J. Thompson, *The Book of Jeremiah [NICOT]* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980) 513-514. In any case, the fact remains that Jeremiah predicted a limitation to the exile and a restoration to follow.

Jerusalem and the towns of Judah are personified as the hearers of this good news that Adonay Yahweh is coming to them with power, reward and infinite tenderness (40:9-11). In contrast to the bitterness of exile, when Yahweh had come against his people as a man of war, he now comes to them as their defending Savior and Shepherd.

While the immediate meaning of this passage concerns the return of the remnant from Babylonian exile, the apostles and authors of the New Testament saw striking overtones in this passage with regard to the coming of Jesus Christ and the preaching of the Christian gospel. The pericopes seem to function like prophetic double entendres. They have an immediate meaning in the crucible of history, but later, they seem to anticipate a spiritual meaning in the salvific purposes of God. It was Jesus himself who explained to his disciples that this was so (Lk. 24:44-47).<sup>96</sup> Thus, the first voice crying in the desert (40:3) is given a christological meaning with reference to John the Baptist (Mt. 3:3//Mk. 1:2-3/Lk. 3:4-6). The highest revelation of God's glory (40:5) was to be in his one and only Son (Jn. 1:14). The human dilemma of transitory life (40:6-8) finds its resolution in new birth through the gospel, which is God's enduring word (1 Pe. 1:23-25). The good news was that the Lord was coming (40:10) as the Good Shepherd (40:11; Jn. 10:11, 14), and it must have struck the early Christians with great force to read in their LXX at Is. 40:9 the participle *euangelizomenos* (= the one preaching the gospel). Mark chose to begin his own gospel with this very idea (Mk. 1:1).

### **The Incomparable Greatness of Yahweh (40:12-26)**

Isaiah follows his opening consolation with an extended description of Yahweh's sovereignty. He begins with a series of rhetorical questions (40:12-14), questions that are reminiscent of the questions God once put to Job (Job 38-41). Of course, the answer is that Yahweh alone is capable of all these things. Using anthropomorphisms, the prophet describes God as a craftsman-creator (a potter?) and the sole maker of the universe. The nations are no more than so many grains of dust upon his balance scales (40:15). If appropriate sacrifices were to be made in his honor, all the animals in Lebanon would not suffice nor would its famous cedars be enough firewood (40:16). Before the sovereign God, the nations are nothing, including mighty Babylon (40:17).

It is probable that the Jews were threatened during the exile with the sophisticated mythologies and religions of Mesopotamia. The ancient God of Sinai, whose temple had been burned to the ground, must have seemed rather provincial

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<sup>96</sup>A common designation for this New Testament hermeneutic is typology, cf. E. Ellis, "How the New Testament Uses the Old," *New Testament Interpretation: Essays on Principles and Methods*, ed. I. Marshall (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977) 210-212.

alongside the elaborate richness of the cosmic gods of Babylon. The pagan temples were places where it was believed the gods were present on earth in the form of images. The images were dressed and served with food twice a day, and a curtain was drawn in front of the image while the god "ate". Though people were conscious that the images were humanly constructed, they believed that through special nocturnal rituals these idols were consecrated and used as instruments of the deity. Their mouths were even opened and washed so they could eat.<sup>97</sup> With biting sarcasm, Isaiah compares these pagan idols, which by implication are not gods at all, with Yahweh, who reigns supreme over the entire universe (40:18-26). Even the heavenly bodies, which the Babylonians conceived as astral deities, were nothing more than part of the created order (40:26).

### **Hope for the Future (40:27-31)**

Now, Isaiah turns to the exiles themselves and their bitter complaint that God had abandoned them (40:27). Did they not realize that Yahweh was the everlasting God who did not grow tired and whose wisdom and planning was beyond human conception? To be sure, they had experienced the Deuteronomic curse of exhaustion, anxiety and despair (cf. Dt. 28:65-67). Nevertheless, Yahweh had not abandoned them. He would give strength and hope to those weary with fatigue. They needed only to wait in hope.<sup>98</sup>

### **Yahweh's Courtroom (41)**

A reoccurring metaphor in the prophetic literature of the Old Testament is the scene of a courtroom where Israel and/or the nations are called before God's bar for judgment (cf. Ho. 4:1; Je. 2:9, 29, 34-35; 25:31).<sup>99</sup> Such judgment is patterned after the stipulations in Torah (Dt. 25:1ff.) Here, the courtroom is a world assizes (41:1). God intends to hear the case of Israel among the nations. The pagan nations of the world have invaded and destroyed God's chosen nation, setting themselves against her and bringing charges against her in the name of their gods (41:11).<sup>100</sup> Yahweh is willing to hear the charges (41:21), but in the end, his people will be vindicated.

<sup>97</sup>For more detail regarding Babylonian religion and ritual, see H. Ringgren, *Religions of the Ancient Near East* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1973) 49-123.

<sup>98</sup>The Hebrew verb *qoh* means to wait for something, usually with the implication of tenseness or eagerness, cf. W. Holladay, *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971) 315. Thus, some versions give the rendering, "...they who wait upon the Lord" (KJV, RSV, NASB), while others give the rendering, "...those who hope in the Lord" (NIV, NAB). Still others have, "...those who look to the Lord" (NEB).

<sup>99</sup>For more on this form, see H. Huffmon, "The Covenant Lawsuit in the Prophets," *JBL* 78 (1959) 285-295, where he describes the Old Testament lawsuits as covenant lawsuits in which Israel is examined for her covenant violations.

<sup>100</sup>The NIV somewhat obscures the court language of this verse by the rendering, "...those who oppose you." Better would be the translation, "...those who bring charges against you."

### *The Inquiry (41:2-4)*

The essential nature of God's interrogation of those summoned to his court is whether or not they can fathom his historical purposes, and in particular, whether they can determine the future. Their assessment of things rests only on the present and the past. However, Yahweh controls the future as well, so the present and the past are insufficient grounds to assess the true meaning of events.

The next significant event in the future would be the coming of someone from the east to whom God would hand over the nations of Mesopotamia (41:2b-3). Though this figure is unnamed at present, he is clearly described as being stirred up by God and called into divine service (41:2a, 25).<sup>101</sup> No one, and certainly not the Babylonians, could have foreseen the rise of Cyrus. Only Yahweh, who controls all things from the beginning to the end, knows the full meaning of history (41:4). He is the first and last! Little Israel (cf. 41:14), judged and abandoned to exile, could only look at the present tragedy with hopeless eyes, but Yahweh said, in effect, that he was not through with her yet! Similarly, when John in the Apocalypse looked at the terrible opposition of Rome toward the church, he recalled this self-expression of God who is "the First and the Last" (Rev. 1:17; 2:8; 22:13). The colloquialism is true: "It's not over 'til it's over!"

### *The First Evidence (41:5-7)*

The initial evidence had already occurred that this figure from the east was coming (41:5). Cyrus had advanced to the Anatolian coast in the winter of 546 B.C. The islands in the Aegean had seen him, and those who had been former enemies were now ready to band together for defense (41:6). They frantically multiplied their pagan idols as if to ward off Cyrus' encroaching military threat (41:7). In describing this religious clutching at straws, Isaiah jabs sarcastically at the manufacture of futile pagan idols.

### *Israel, Yahweh's Servant (41:8-20)*

Now, the deeper purpose of Yahweh's historical plans would become clear. The stumbling of Israel in exile was not that she might fall. She remained his chosen people, the descendants of his friend Abraham (41:8). God had chosen her from the ends of the earth (41:9).

Here, the reader is introduced to a metaphor for Israel that will reoccur throughout the remainder of the work, the metaphor of the *Ebed-Yahweh* (= the servant of the Lord). This metaphor will be used with striking fluidity to refer to the one and the many. Collectively, the Ebed-Yahweh is Israel, the remnant of the

<sup>101</sup>Later, Isaiah will directly identify this figure as Cyrus, the Persian (cf. 44:28; 45:1, 13).

nation that went into exile. Individually, the Ebed-Yahweh represents a figure of vicarious suffering, a figure to be taken up later (cf. 42:1; 49:5; 52:13). Such fluidity between the collective and the individual, the one and the many, is part of an ancient thought form.<sup>102</sup> Since Israel was God's servant, chosen long ago, she would be upheld by God's omnipotent hand in spite of the crucible of exile (41:10).<sup>103</sup> All who brought charges against her would be ashamed (41:11). The enemies of Israel would be vanquished, for Yahweh, the great Warrior *par excellence*, would fight for her (41:12-14). As in days of old, the fledgling remnant would conquer her enemies like a threshing sledge over grain (41:15-16). As wretched as Israel had become in exile, she had not been forsaken by Yahweh (41:17). Her future was bright, for God would turn the wasteland into gardens (41:18-19). Then the nations who stood at God's judgment bar would understand that only the God who is Lord over history could have performed all these things (41:20).

### *The Challenge (41:21-29)*

The conclusion of this court scene, which began in 41:1, is a challenge from Yahweh, the great Judge. He calls upon the nations to set forth their arguments against Israel's future (41:21). They had written her off, but now Yahweh challenged them to use their idols to foretell her future (41:22-23). Once more (cf. 40:19-20; 41:7), the sarcasm toward pagan idolatry is biting as Yahweh demands of these manufactured gods, "Do something, even if it's bad!" It's bad enough that the idols could do nothing good, but they were even impotent even to do anything bad. They were less than nothing, along with their abominable worshipers (41:24)!

In contrast, Yahweh, the Lord of history, was about to do something of tremendous significance. To demonstrate that he was truly in control, he tells about it before it happens. The invader from the north and east would surely come, crushing all foes in his path (41:25). Certainly no Babylonian gods had foreseen this event (41:26), but Yahweh had been planning on it from the very beginning. When Cyrus and the Persians would finally arrive, God could simply say, "Here they are, just as I told you" (41:27)! As for the pagan idols, they were images of confusion and emptiness, no more than the blowing of the wind (41:28-29).

<sup>102</sup>For extensive discussion on this ancient thought form of corporate personality, see H. Robinson, *Corporate Personality in Ancient Israel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980). See especially pages 39-42.

<sup>103</sup>The poetry of 41:10 is captured beautifully in the second stanza of the well-loved hymn, "How Firm a Foundation."

*'Fear not I am with thee; O be not dismayed,  
For I am thy God, and will still give thee aid;  
I'll strengthen thee, help thee, and cause thee to stand,  
Upheld by My righteous, omnipotent hand.'*

## The Servant-Savior (42-43)

In the courtroom scene of the previous chapter (41:8-9), the nation Israel was described as the *Ebed-Yahweh* (= Servant of the Lord) who had been chosen by God from the far corners of the earth. This metaphor for the nation will be used again and again in Second Isaiah, and beginning in 42:1, the reader will encounter the first of what have come to be called the four Songs of the Servant.<sup>104</sup>

The most intriguing question about this figure is one of identity. Who is the servant? As the metaphor is developed, it seems to fluctuate between a collective figure for the nation Israel and an individual figure who has a mission to the nation Israel as well as to the world. Even in biblical times, this question was vexing, for the Ethiopian proselyte struggled with it, as is evidenced by his query, "Who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?" (Ac. 8:34). As a collective figure, the metaphor clearly represents the nation Israel (41:8; 44:1-2, 21; 45:4; 48:20; 49:3), but this identification hardly exhausts the metaphor. It is when the metaphor depicts an individual that it is most intriguing. Could it be the prophet himself? Is he a king of David's line yet to come? Could he be an historical figure, like the suffering prophet Jeremiah? For Christians, the answer became clear in the life, passion and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth.

### The Ebed-Yahweh (42:1-25)

The oracles about the Servant of Yahweh describe the servant's mission and call as well as his failure and judgment. In the first servant song (42:1-4), Yahweh himself presents the reader with his servant, one who has been chosen and endowed with the Holy Spirit to bring justice to the nations (42:1). This servant stands in sharp contrast to Cyrus, the Persian, who was also God's instrument. Cyrus would serve Yahweh's purpose unwittingly, but the servant of the Lord would accomplish Yahweh's purpose intentionally and faithfully. Unlike Cyrus, this servant would not come with violence and noise (42:2-3). He would not crush the weak. Rather, he would come with patient obedience and dogged persistence, pressing on until he had established justice for the nations (42:4).

In one sense, this call of the servant must refer to the purpose of God for Israel. Abraham, the ancestor of the nation, had been promised that all the nations would be blessed through his offspring (Ge. 12:1-3). The Israelite nation had been called to serve as priests for the nations of the world (Ex. 19:3-6), though this calling was conditional upon her faithfulness to the covenant. Because of her

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<sup>104</sup>This singling out of the four Songs of the Servant is a product of 19th century scholarship. They are oracles which depict the mission of the *Ebed-Yahweh* (42:1-6), his call (49:1-6), his submission to the divine purpose (50:4-9), and his humiliation and ultimate exaltation (52:13--53:12), cf. C. North, "The Servant of the Lord," *IDB* (1962) IV.292-294.

repeated breaking of the covenant, the ideal had never been realized, though hints of it are to be found in the books of Ruth and Jonah.

Now, in the first song of the servant, the ideal is again revived. Though his collective servant had failed, his individual servant would succeed. God's first purpose had not changed. He was interested in the nations, and he had chosen his servant to fulfil his divine mission. This time, the mission would be accomplished!

The New Testament community of Christians understood clearly who the individual servant was. He had been endowed with the Holy Spirit at the Jordan River, and he was presented by God himself, "Here is my Son; with you I am well pleased" (Mt. 3:16-17//Mk. 1:10-11//Lk. 3:21-22; Jn. 1:32-34).

Yahweh Elohim, the Creator of the universe (42:5), had given his call to his servant, and he would enable him to fulfil it (42:6a). The servant's mission was universal in scope (42:6b), and he would pay special favor to the disadvantaged and oppressed (42:7). Though the exiles were floundering in a sea of Babylonian idolatry, they must realize that Yahweh alone was in control of history. He would not give his glory to idols (42:8), and just as he had ordained all that had happened in the past, including the exile (42:9a), he would order the new events yet to come (42:9b).

Because of his great purpose, now renewed in the call of his servant, Yahweh invited the nations to sing a new song of praise (42:10a). This new song corresponded to the "new thing" which Yahweh was about to do (cf. 42:9). From the villages along the seashore to the settlements in desert, all were called upon to sing praises to God for his promised salvation to the nations (42:10b-12). In delivering his people from evil, Yahweh once more would march out like a Man of War (42:13; cf. Ex. 15:3). He had restrained his zeal about his great plan during Israel's national history and exile. Still, the conception of his great plan was ancient. While the nation had stumbled along, continually breaking covenant during this long gestation, Yahweh had refused to give vent to his excitement. Now, however, he was gasping and panting like a woman in the throes of childbirth, ready to take decisive action (42:14).

The effect would be cosmic (42:15). In restoring the remnant of Israel, God would lead them in ways they could never have imagined as he brought them out of darkness into light (42:16). In the face of a God like this, how utterly foolish it would be to trust in the gods of the pagans (42:17).

Now comes the explanation of Israel's failure in the servant's role. All along she had been deaf and blind to God's greater purpose (42:18-19). She had seen, yet she had not seen (42:20). Though she had been given the Torah at Sinai (42:21), she had fallen prey to the Deuteronomic curse because of her continual covenant breaking (42:22). Yahweh had handed her over to her enemies because of her

disobedience (42:23-24). She went through the holocaust of exile, yet even in this distress, she did not understand nor take to heart what had happened (42:25).

### **Yahweh, Israel's Creator-Savior (43:1-13)**

Israel's failure in the servant role did not mean that God had abandoned the nation, however. As severe as was his judgment upon her, a remnant had been promised the hope of return (cf. Is. 10:20-21). The present holocaust of suffering was not final. Yahweh had created the nation Israel, he had redeemed her, and he had named her, making her his own (43:1).<sup>105</sup> She would not be destroyed by dangers such as the Red Sea, the Jordan River nor the holocaust of exile (43:2). God would make whatever sacrifice was necessary, be it nations or persons, in order to preserve his people (43:3-4). He would regather his elect from all the directions in which they had been scattered, for they had been created for his glory (43:5-7). Though Israel was blind to God's purposes, still she would be saved (43:8). In full view of all the nations, nations who served pagan gods and who could not fathom the meaning of history, God would present his servant Israel, redeemed from exile, as proof of his sovereignty (43:9-13). Though the nations could not fathom God's saving purpose, Israel certainly could witness to it, since she had experienced his redemptive acts from the beginning of her national existence (43:10a, 12b).

### **God's New Action in Light of the Past (43:14-28)**

The beginning of God's new redemptive action, which had such a universal scope, would be initiated in the preservation of the remnant of Israel. The Babylonian oppressors would be overthrown (43:14). While Cyrus was the tool, Yahweh was the master (43:15). The one who in ancient times brought his people safely through the Red Sea would do it again (43:16-17). The remnant of Israel should not be content to merely reminisce over her past deliverance from Egypt, for Yahweh was about to effect a new deliverance (43:18-19a). As in ancient times, he would provide water in the desert so that the people he had created could proclaim his praise (43:19b-21).<sup>106</sup>

Yet in spite of his great purpose, Israel, as the servant, continued to fail miserably. She did not call upon her God, and she had not expended herself in seeking him (43:22). While the temple was now gone, and though in its absence God had not required the traditional offerings (43:23-24a), still the people had

<sup>105</sup>George Knight is probably correct in saying that a "prophetic perfect" tense is unnecessary here, cf. *Isaiah 40-55* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984) 60. The accomplished fact of Israel's election and redemption depends upon God's plan from the foundations of the world (cf. 51:16).

<sup>106</sup>It is far from accidental that Peter, in his first letter, brings together the original purpose for Israel as a nation of priests (Ex. 19:3) and the renewed purpose for Israel as the proclaimers of God's praise (Is. 43:20). Of course, Peter sees the ultimate fulfillment of these ideals in the Christian church (1 Pe. 2:9).

continued to burden the Lord with their sins and transgressions (43:24b). What was to be done? God, himself, would take the initiative to cancel his people's sins! Previously, they were required to take their own initiative through the appropriate vehicles of temple ritual. Now, however, God would do it for them, since the old vehicles were gone (43:25).

Still, though God may have blotted out their sins, the people must ever remember their sinful propensity. Once again using court language, Yahweh challenged the nation to remember its checkered past. The case for national innocence was extremely weak (43:26). Even Abraham, her first father, was a sinner (Ge. 20:9-13).<sup>107</sup> From Moses to the exile, her national history was dotted with wayward and sinful leaders (43:27). So, God had consigned the nation to irrevocable destruction and put her to the ban, just as Joshua had done to Jericho (43:28).<sup>108</sup> The exile to Babylon was the final stroke of this severe judgment. Yet, even in the midst of this devastating penalty, a remnant was preserved through God's mercy and grace, a remnant which would be the beginning of a new work by God (42:9) and worthy of a new song (42:10). Is it any wonder that St. Paul would say, centuries later, "Did they [the Israelites] stumble so as to fall beyond recovery? Not at all! Rather, because of their transgression, salvation has come to the nations" (Ro. 11:11)!

## Jacob, My Servant (44-45)

Though Israel was God's servant who had terribly failed in her calling, it must not be assumed that her relationship with Yahweh had ended. This might have been the expected conclusion, but it would not have been a correct one. The ancient prayer in *The Book of Common Prayer* is true when it so admirably states of God, "Thy property is always to have mercy." So, not only had Yahweh called Israel to be his servant, he had judged her for her covenant failure and then promised to blot out her sins (cf. 43:25). This act of divine forgiveness was to be the first step in the "new thing" that God was going to do (cf. 42:9; 43:19).

## The Promise of the Spirit (44:1-5)

The promise of the Spirit's coming must be viewed against the background of

<sup>107</sup>If by "first father" is meant Jacob, the case is even stronger. Jacob was not much more than a scoundrel in the Genesis record. He manipulated his brother (Ge. 25:27-34), lied to his dying father (Ge. 27), and deceived his father-in-law (Ge. 31:19-21).

<sup>108</sup>The Masoretes pointed the verbs in 43:28 as uncompleted, but Whybray is probably correct in assessing this to have been a mistake. They should be understood as *waw-consecutives*, that is, in a completed tense, cf. R. Whybray, *Isaiah 40-66 [NCB]* (Grand Rapids: 1981) 93. The NIV follows the masoretic text here and renders the verbs as future tenses (so ASV, NASB, NKJB), but the preferable translation is a past tense (so RSV, KJV, NAB, NEB, AB, OTL, LXX).

its removal from the first temple, as described by Ezekiel (Eze. 10). If the Spirit had departed from Mt. Zion at the time when her citizens were scattered among the nations, Ezekiel also predicted that Israel would be restored and endowed with a new Spirit (Eze. 11:18-20; 36:24-28; 37:14; 39:29). Isaiah here picks up the same theme. Upon Jeshurun,<sup>109</sup> God's servant whom he had created and chosen, would be poured out the divine Spirit like water on parched soil (44:1-3).<sup>110</sup> Though the citizens of Israel had been withered like grass by the hot breath of God (cf. 40:7, 23-24), this refreshing rain of the Spirit would cause their roots to revive (44:4). Though once they had been rejected by Yahweh, now they would belong to him and to his restored people (44:5).

### **Yahweh and the Gods (44:6-20)**

In the original exodus, when Yahweh struck Egypt blow after blow, the nature of the event was a confrontation between Yahweh, who was truly God, and the deities of the Egyptians, who were merely pretenders (cf. Nu. 33:4).<sup>111</sup> During the national life of Israel the issue was the same, particularly as epitomized in the bold confrontation between Elijah and the priests of Baal (1 Kg. 18). Now that Israel was in Babylon, confronted by another pantheon of pagan deities, the issue was still the same. Who was really God? Who was really in control of human life and the events of history?

Yahweh alone, the one who was Israel's royal redeemer, laid claim to true godhood (44:6). His credentials were that he was the lord of history, performing mighty acts in the past and foretelling his purposes in the future (44:7). The huddled group of exiles could testify to Yahweh's sovereignty over history, both because he had given them victory over the Canaanites, as he had promised, and because he had given his own people over to exile in judgment for their sins, which he had also promised (44:8). These pitiful exiles were themselves witnesses to God's true identity (cf. 43:10, 12).

By way of contrast, the pagan idols of Babylon were nothing, or as Isaiah says earlier, "less than nothing" (41:24). Similar to his previous attacks upon

<sup>109</sup>The name Jeshurun is an ancient poetic name for Israel coming from the Song of Moses (Dt. 32:15; 33:5, 26). The name derives from the word *yashar* (= upright) and portrays Israel in her idealistic character. Jeshurun is not so much what Israel actually was as what she ought to have been. Even in the Deuteronomic account this is clear, for Jeshurun "grew fat and kicked... abandoning the God who made him" (Dt. 32:15). Just as the name Jeshurun comes from this ancient poem, so also does the metaphor for God as "the Rock" (Dt. 32:18/Is. 44:8b).

<sup>110</sup>It is probable that Jesus alludes to this passage when he speaks of the gift of the Spirit as "streams of living water" which was to be given to all who believed in him (cf. Jn. 7:38-39).

<sup>111</sup>The ten plagues were direct attacks upon various Egyptian deities, i.e., Hapi the Nile god, Khnum the creator of water, Heqt the goddess of childbirth represented by a frog, Hathor the goddess represented by a cow, the Apis Bull of Memphis, Seth the god of wind and storm, Isis the goddess of life, Min the god of vegetation and fertility, Re and the other deities associated with the sun, and Osiris the judge of the dead.

idolatry, Yahweh now gives an extended diatribe on the futility of pagan religion which centers upon idol worship. Idol worshipers are blind and ignorant (44:9). They craft their deities from metal or wood, now pouring it into a mold or now chiseling it into a human-like shape (44:10-13). The craftsman who makes such idols becomes tired, so why should not his crafted god become weary as well (44:12b)? Yahweh, of course, never becomes weary or faint (cf. 40:28-31)! What irony there is in that the one who makes idols of wood uses the same wood to cook his supper and warm himself (44:14-17). While the wood was growing as a cypress or an oak, he did not even cultivate it; rather, the rain (which Yahweh sends) made it grow (44:14b). Utterly deluded, he is determined to worship this idol with its plastered eyes and wooden brain (44:18), following it blindly and making his confession of faith before a block of wood (44:19-20).

### **The Servant, Redeemed and Forgiven (44:21-23)**

In the midst of such paganism, Israel must bear in mind that she is remembered by Yahweh (44:21). More to the point, though Israel had failed in her servant role to the nations and had broken covenant so that she came under the judgment of exile, she would be redeemed and forgiven (44:22). The teachers of Torah were quite right in saying, "Who can forgive sins but God alone" (cf. Mk. 2:7)? Yahweh fully intended to forgive his people's sins, as Jeremiah had also predicted (cf. Je. 31:34). Yahweh had not waited for Israel's initiative to repent, but he had himself created conditions whereby she could repent (44:22b). Thus, a hymn of praise to Yahweh's gracious and redemptive initiative should burst from the heavens and earth (44:23)!

### **Cyrus and the Remnant (44:24--45:25)**

The restoration of the remnant to the holy land would initiate the fulfillment of Yahweh's gracious promises for the future. It is important to notice that here, as elsewhere, God's redemptive promises are rooted in concrete historical events. The exodus, the exile, the action of Cyrus, the birth of Jesus, and the passion of the cross are all events rooted in space-time history. This is the nature of biblical faith.

Before it ever happened, Isaiah predicted that "one from the north...from the rising sun" would be Yahweh's chosen instrument of fulfillment (cf. 41:25). The exiles would be allowed to return (cf. 43:5-7). Yahweh, the lord of history who had created the universe and who foiled the pretensions of the pagan diviners, had declared in advance that Jerusalem and Judah would be restored (44:24-26). Just as God sovereignly ruled the seas and rivers, he also sovereignly ruled kings and rulers (44:27). He had commissioned Cyrus, the Persian, to be the shepherd decreeing that the remnant flock of Israel could go back to the holy land. Before it ever occurred, the edict of Cyrus was predicted by Yahweh (44:28).

At last, Isaiah announced the name of the coming historical conqueror. Cyrus II, the Great, was the founder of the Persian empire, which he ruled from 559-530 B.C., an empire that flourished for some two centuries until its conquest by Alexander the Great in 331 B.C. His bloodless capture of Babylon, predicted by the prophet Daniel (Da. 5), was one of his greatest moments.<sup>112</sup> Part of Cyrus' conciliatory policy toward subject peoples was to allow them to resettle in their homelands and restore their traditional places of worship. The repatriation of the Jews was a result of this broad policy which, for the Jews, began with Cyrus' decree concerning their return to Palestine in his first regnal year as the new king of Babylon (Ezr. 1:1).<sup>113</sup>

The titles which are conferred upon Cyrus are quite striking. He is Yahweh's shepherd (44:28), Yahweh's messiah (45:1), one who calls upon Yahweh's name (41:25b),<sup>114</sup> one whom Yahweh calls by name (45:3-4), and one whom Yahweh loves (48:14).<sup>115</sup> In all of this, it still remains that Cyrus is the unwitting tool of Yahweh. His great conquests (45:1b) are merely the result of Yahweh's advance work (45:2-3). Though he does not acknowledge Yahweh, he will be used by Yahweh for the sake of Israel, Yahweh's servant, so that all people will know that Yahweh alone is truly God (45:4-7). This marvelous and sovereign promise of God calls for a prayer of urgency that he will perform this powerful work in history.

The natural inclination of the exiles toward this striking prediction was to pass it off as ridiculous. Isaiah anticipated this reaction and formed a rebuttal toward any criticisms. Israel, whom God had created, cannot quarrel with her Creator that his choice of the pagan Cyrus is inappropriate (45:9). The exiles were God's procreation, and they must not criticize the work of their divine parent (45:10). His predictions about the future were certain and not to be discounted. If Yahweh could create the universe, surely he could also use Cyrus for his divine purpose in restoring the exiles to Jerusalem (45:11-13a). Cyrus would indeed

<sup>112</sup>This event of 539 B.C. was recorded in cuneiform upon the "Cyrus Cylinder," now in the British Museum. A translation of its contents may be read in J. Pritchard, *The Ancient Near East* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University, 1958) I.206-208.

<sup>113</sup>D. Clines, *ISBE* (1979) I.845-849.

<sup>114</sup>The Massoretic vowel pointing in 41:25 reads, "...he called on my name." As such, the meaning seems to be that Cyrus was a worshiper of Yahweh. However, in 45:4-5 it is asserted twice over that Cyrus did not acknowledge Yahweh. Thus, some scholars choose to emend the text and so making it parallel to 45:3, "I have called him by name," J. McKenzie, *Second Isaiah [AB]* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1968) 33 and C. Westermann, *Isaiah 40-66 [OTL]*, trans. D. Stalker (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1969) 82. A similar emendation was followed in the LXX. Other scholars interpret the phrase to be "an exaggeration of enthusiasm," cf. G. Knight, 41. It seems better to take the statement in the sense of Ezr. 1:2, where Cyrus uses the name Yahweh in his edict of repatriation for the Jews. This does not indicate that he was a worshiper of Yahweh, only that he recognized Yahweh as the object of Jewish worship.

<sup>115</sup>The NIV has rendered this phrase "the LORD's chosen ally," but the Massoretic text reads, "Yahweh loves him."

perform Yahweh's will, and he would do so without any inducements other than that Yahweh was in control of history (45:13b).

Now follows several brief oracles. First, the nations of northern Africa would eventually pass in review before the citizens of Jerusalem, acknowledging that God was among his restored people (45:14). The pagan idolaters would be ashamed in view of Israel's ultimate salvation (45:15-17). God's purpose in the very beginning was to bring order out of chaos (45:18; cf. Ge. 1:1-3), and this purpose was the same now, a purpose which had been revealed by his prophets (45:19). Idolatry among the nations was a religion of ignorance and futility, for only Yahweh could control the outcome of history (45:20-21). In the end, God's purpose for the nations would be fulfilled, the universal purpose he had promised in his covenant to Abraham (Ge. 12:1-3) and announced at Sinai (Ex. 19:5-6). Every knee would bow and every tongue would swear the confession, "In Yahweh alone is righteousness and strength" (45:22-24). In the end, God's people would be vindicated and saved (45:25), along with everyone who would call upon his name (45:22; cf. Joel 2:32a). In the New Testament, St. Paul understands this moment to be at the great eschatological judgment (Ro. 14:10b-12), and even more particularly, he proclaims that the object of this veneration will be Jesus, God's Son (Phil. 2:9-11).

## The Fall of Babylon (46-47)

If the future held great promise for the remnant of Israel in exile, it equally held doom for Babylon. The same Cyrus who would be an unwitting shepherd for Israel (cf. 44:28) would be a bird of prey against Israel's captors (46:11). As before (cf. 41:26-27; 44:7-8, 24-28; 45:21), Yahweh continues to predict the future, staking his own integrity upon the fact that he is the lord of history who can both interpret its past and control its future.

## Who Carries Who (46:1-4)?

The sarcasm which has been directed toward Babylonian religion has been biting (40:19-20; 41:7, 22-24; 44:9-20), and here it reaches a crescendo in a powerful contrast. Each year in Babylon at the Akitu festival, there was an annual processional in which the images of the gods<sup>116</sup> were carried through the streets to the great E-Sagila shrine. This processional, as well as others like it, signified that one god was paying an honorary visit to another god in his temple on his festival day.<sup>117</sup> The irony, of course, is that these gods had to be carried at all. The sight of

<sup>116</sup>Bel is a title corresponding to the concept of "lord," and it functions as another name for Marduk, the guardian of Babylon. It is the counterpart to the name Ba'al in the Canaanite pantheons, Ringgren, 54. Nebo was Marduk's son, the god of wisdom.

<sup>117</sup>Knight, 101; McKensie, 87.

such idols, lying horizontally strapped to the backs of cows, was a powerful commentary on the powerlessness of Babylonian religion (46:1). In a similar fashion, these same images would soon be strapped to the backs of beasts of burden and carried off as trophies of war (46:2).

In sharp contrast to the Babylonians, who carried their gods on the backs of cows, is the sacred history of Yahweh, who carried his people through history (46:3). From the time of her national birth even throughout her entire national existence, God had sustained and would sustain his people. He who sustained and carried his people would also be the one to rescue them from the bondage of Egypt (46:4).

### **The Impotent Gods of Babylon Versus the God who Keeps his Promises 46:5-13)**

Statements of comparison between Yahweh and the pagan deities reoccur (cf. 40:18, 25; 46:5). Yahweh is strong and tireless (40:28-29); idols are weak and impotent (44:12). Yahweh predicts the future, while the idols are ignorant and mute (41:21-24; 44:18). Such comparative statements are a trenchant call for the remnant of Israel to decide whom they will serve. Would they worship the idols of Babylon, which were crafted by artists and fastened securely so that they would not topple over (46:6-7a; cf. 40:20b; 41:7b)? Would they give allegiance to these gods who could neither speak nor act (46:7b)?

Of course, Israel had done precisely that very thing in her national history. Again and again she had forsaken Yahweh to serve the impotent gods of the Canaanites. She had been a nation of rebels (46:8). However, she ought to remember that this religious deviance had not guaranteed her security, for she had been abandoned to exile by the impotent deities of Canaan (46:9). Only the God who controlled history deserves allegiance (46:10), and the terrible exile, which Yahweh had repeatedly predicted through his prophets for more than two centuries, was a devastating reminder of who was really in control!

Now, this same Yahweh was predicting that he would crush Babylon through the instrument of Cyrus, that "bird of prey from a far-off land" (46:11). Even more to the point, Yahweh would save his own people through the work of this foreign conqueror, though his own people were far from being righteous or deserving (46:12-13). The salvation which God would bring would be an act of grace, effected by his own divine initiative.

### **The Coming Overthrow (47:1-15)**

Now there follows a lengthy oracle describing the coming overthrow of Babylon. It is a logical sequel, of course, to what Yahweh had already predicted.

The rise of Cyrus, the Persian, could only mean the fall of Babylon.

The oracle takes the form of a funeral taunt-song.<sup>118</sup> The metaphor describes the reversal of Babylon from the elevated status of a queen to the low status of a slave girl (47:1). No longer would she be shielded as a resident in the palace, but instead, she would grind at the mill, wading through the streams with bare legs and open to exploitation by an casual passerby. No one in the ancient world was a more helpless victim of war than the unmarried girl, for foreign soldiers habitually raped their victims (cf. Jg. 5:30). Still, the ravishing of Babylon would at the same time be an act of redemption for Israel, for the event would be under the control of Yahweh, the holy one (47:4).

So, Babylon would receive her just deserts, just as had Israel a few decades earlier. Her queenly status would be abolished (47:5-7a). She had supposed that her political rise was due to her own power (47:7b), and she arrogantly assumed that she was unassailable (47:8). Yet, in a single day Yahweh predicted that she would be stripped of every vestige of royalty, both children and husband (47:9a).<sup>119</sup> Though Babylon trusted in her pagan incantations to save her, such rituals would be worthless (47:9b-11). Of course, she could keep on performing such rituals, and the taunt-song encourages her to do so (47:12-13). In the end, however, her efforts would all be wasted (47:14-15).

## **Israel and Yahweh's Servant (48-50)**

Earlier (see comments on 42:1-4), it was pointed out that the metaphor of the Ebed-Yahweh fluctuates between a collective figure representing the ancient nation Israel and an individual figure representing some future leader who was yet unidentified. This fluctuation is particularly evident in the second song of the Servant and the passages surrounding it. The relationship between Israel as Yahweh's collective servant and the coming one as Yahweh's individual servant is the heart of the next several oracles. Israel, the collective servant, failed terribly in her role. The coming individual Servant would be everything that the old Israel was not--and he would succeed in the most gracious and powerful way!

## **Yahweh Confronts His People with their Stubbornness (48:1-11)**

The stubbornness of the nation Israel was almost proverbial. Moses had

<sup>118</sup>This genre of a funeral taunt-song is not uncommon among the prophets (cf. Is. 13-23; Je. 46-51; Eze. 25-32). It at once mocks its object with ridicule and contempt while offering a display of insincere grief over its downfall, cf. Whybray, 118.

<sup>119</sup>The prediction that Babylon would fall in a single day may be more than just a poetic expression. According to the ancient historian Herodotus, the Persians drew off the river by a canal into a marsh, making the stream sink until it could be forded. The Persian army then made its way into Babylon by the channel of the Euphrates, which had sunk to the depth of a soldier's thigh, and the city fell without a battle, cf. D. Clines, "Cyrus," *ISBE* (1979) I.847.

barely received the decalogue engraved in stone at Sinai when the people broke their newly formed covenant with Yahweh (Ex. 32). The period of the judges and the national history of the monarchy were one, long history of repeated failure to remain faithful to Yahweh. Two centuries earlier, Hosea had described the northern nation as a faulty bow which was incapable of shooting straight (Ho. 7:16), and a century earlier, Jeremiah had diagnosed the southern nation as a people with an incurable disease (Je. 8:21-22). Now, God confronted the exiles with this national history of abysmal failure. In their religion, they may well have taken oaths in Yahweh's name, but they did not truly serve him (48:1-2). He sent his prophets to explain to them their future, and just as the prophets had said, he sovereignly controlled their history (48:3). This advance information was crucial so that when the prophets were ignored, as they invariably were, their oracles became a safeguard to prevent these stubborn people from crediting the outcome of events to the Canaanite gods and goddesses (48:4-6a).

Now, Yahweh was about to act once again (48:6b), and true to form, he was predicting his plans in advance (cf. Am. 3:7). His new action would be so unusual and abrupt that rebel Israel would be unable to pass it off as some commonplace expectation (48:7-8). Though the nation deserved to be completely cut off because of her repeated covenant violations, he had restrained his anger again and again in order to confirm that his true nature was positive, loving and merciful (48:9). But God cannot be mocked forever, and Israel was finally sent into the exilic furnace of affliction. Yet even here, in what should have been the ultimate refining process, no silver could be found at all (48:10). There was still no "vestige of intrinsic goodness in the chosen people."<sup>120</sup> Still, in all of his acts, both in patience and in judgment, God had remained true to himself (48:11).

### **Free at Last (48:12-22)**

Upon the basis of his status as the sovereign Creator (48:12-13), God challenged the exiles to produce any pagan oracle which had predicted the coming of Cyrus to destroy Babylon (48:14-15). Now, however, God had given his prophetic Spirit to his prophet to predict this very event (48:16).<sup>121</sup> All along, Yahweh had directed the history of the nation Israel, even when the nation paid no attention (48:17-19). How wonderful life would have been for the people had they listened to and obeyed God's commandments. He would have fulfilled his promise that they were to become as numerous as the grains of sand (cf. Ge. 13:14-17). Nevertheless, God would save his wayward servant after all, though not in the way

<sup>120</sup>Knight, 118.

<sup>121</sup>This is the only place, apart from 40:6, where the prophet of Isaiah 40-66 speaks of himself directly. Unfortunately, there is nothing in the text which bears upon the question of authorship.

originally anticipated. Now he would save her from the bondage of Babylon as once before he had freed her from the bondage of Egypt (48:20-21). They would be free at last through an act of divine grace. As for those who would refuse him, Yahweh would give to them no *shalom* (48:22).

### **The Second Servant Song (49:1-6)**

If the first Servant Song presents the Ebed-Yahweh as the chosen one who was endowed with the Holy Spirit to bring justice to the nations (Is. 42:1-4), the second Servant Song explains how the Ebed-Yahweh was chosen from birth and commissioned by God to turn Israel back to himself. The far-off nations are called upon to listen to the commission of this Servant, chosen even before his birth (49:1). He would be a powerful spokesman for Yahweh, having been kept hidden in the eternal purposes of God until the time of his revealing (49:2; cf. Ro. 16:25-26). Like the ancient nation, this Chosen One also would be called "Israel" (49:3). However, while on one hand the metaphor of the Servant is the embodiment of the nation, on the other hand the metaphor also speaks of one who is to be distinguished from the nation and who is commissioned to restore the nation (49:5-6a).<sup>122</sup> Israel as the collective servant is blind and deaf (cf. 42:19), and after surveying her bitter exile, she concludes that her service for Yahweh has been an exercise in futility (49:4a). Only God himself knew what the future held for her (49:4b). But the chosen individual, commissioned before his birth to be Yahweh's Servant, not only would restore the tribes of Israel to God but also would bring salvation to the ends of the earth (49:5-6).

This gospel of universal salvation through the mission of the Servant was central to the earliest Christians. If Jesus was indeed the Servant, then his mission was to the nations as well as to Israel, as Simeon proclaimed through the Holy Spirit in the time of Jesus' infancy (cf. Lk. 2:30-32). It is not incidental that Paul and Barnabas quoted Isaiah 49:6 and applied it directly to their own preaching to non-Jews in Pisidian Antioch (cf. Ac. 13:46-48).

### **God's Promise to his Servant (49:7-13)**

The coming chosen Servant, the individual, would be truly effective in turning the wayward servant, Israel, back to God. This was Yahweh's promise. Though the Servant would be despised and abhorred (49:7a), in the end he would be honored by the nations because Yahweh had chosen him (49:7b).<sup>123</sup> As Yahweh's

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<sup>122</sup>F. Bruce, New Testament Development of Old Testament Themes (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969) 86.

<sup>123</sup>Most commentators apply 49:7 to the collective servant, but particularly in light of the Fourth Servant Song (Is. 52:13--53:12), it seems feasible that the passage refers to the individual servant. Jesus as the Servant was despised and abhorred, and under Pilate, Herod and Caesar, he lived as a "servant of rulers," cf. G. Grogan, "Isaiah," *EBC* (1986) VI.285.

Servant, he would call for salvation and Yahweh would answer (49:8a).<sup>124</sup> The redemptive mission of the Servant would match the time of God's favor to the nations, as Paul also interprets (2 Co. 6:2). Those in captivity would hear the cry of freedom, "Come out" (49:9a). The land would be restored (49:8b), and the desert would change into the beauty and productivity of a paradise (49:9b-10). People from the ends of the earth<sup>125</sup> would come to share in this redemptive benefit (49:11-13).

### **Restoration and Honor (49:14--50:3)**

The stupendous nature of such glowing promises, when placed alongside the realities of the exile, were apt to cause disbelief. Apparently, the popular opinion among the exiles was that Yahweh had abandoned them altogether (49:14). To counter this gloomy sentiment, Yahweh casts himself in a feminine role and compares the relationship between himself and Israel to a nursing mother with a baby. Would such a mother abandon her infant? Yet even if she did, Yahweh would not abandon Zion (49:15). He had engraved her name upon his hands, and her fallen walls were ever in his mind (49:16).<sup>126</sup> The future held forth a glorious return of the exiles to Zion, and the holy mountain once again would display her worshiping sons as ornaments like a bride (49:17-18). The promise of numerous progeny, originally made to Abraham but thwarted because of the exile (cf. 48:18-19), would be fulfilled (49:19-21). Even the pagan nations would assist in bringing home the captives to Zion, carrying and fostering and nursing the children of the remnant and falling on their faces to worship on the holy mountain (49:22-23).

Was this reversal of fortunes possible? The rhetorical questions in 49:24 anticipate the incredulous character of these promises. Yet, it would happen! Those who waited upon Yahweh in hope would not be disappointed (49:23b).<sup>127</sup> Yahweh would oppose his people's oppressors. He would save his people and judge their enemies so all would know that he was the sovereign Lord of history (49:25-26).

In continuing his response to Israel's belief that he had abandoned the nation altogether (cf. 49:14), Yahweh now uses two other metaphors, the metaphor of a

<sup>124</sup>Notice that the expression "covenant for the people" is here repeated from 42:6. The phrase possibly refers to what Jeremiah called the "new covenant" (cf. Je. 31:31-34).

<sup>125</sup>The term *Sinim* is unclear, possibly referring to Aswan, Egypt. *BDB* identifies it with the Chinese, cf. 696. In either case, the point is to refer to people from the far-off lands of the world.

<sup>126</sup>Just what an engraving on the hands may mean is unclear, but Franz Delitzsch may be correct in interpreting this as a tattoo, cf. F. Delitzsch, "Isaiah," *Keil & Delitzsch* (rpt. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973) VII.269. We do know that some of the other nations tattooed the name of their deities upon their hands, and this may be a play upon this idea. In modern times, the holocaust center in Jerusalem appropriately was named *Yad Va-shem* (= Hand and Name") based on this passage in 49:16.

<sup>127</sup>It should be noted that the Hebrew word for "hope" or "wait" is the same as used in 40:31a.

husband and wife and the metaphor of a slave and a master (50:1a). According to Torah, no divorce in Israel was official until the husband had given his wife a certificate of divorce (cf. Dt. 24:1-4). In fact, the northern nation, as the symbolic wife of Yahweh, had been given such a divorce certificate in her exile to Assyria (cf. Je. 3:8). The southern nation, Judah, had received no such document. Accordingly, though she had been unfaithful, she was still Yahweh's wife to be claimed by him. Similarly, though Israel was like a slave who had run away to another master, there had been no legal transfer of ownership and no exchange of payment. Thus, she was still his to be reclaimed. The fundamental truth, of course, is that Yahweh did not reject Israel so much as Israel rejected him (50:1b-3). The exile was not due to Yahweh's weakness, but rather, to Israel's unresponsiveness to her God.

### **The Third Servant Song (50:4-9)**

Now the voice of the individual Servant, the Coming One, is to be heard for the third time. The Servant, the individual, stands in sharpest contrast to the servant, Israel. Whereas the servant, Israel, is blind and deaf (cf. 42:19) and unresponsive (50:2), the Servant, the individual, will be persistent in his obedience, receptive in his attitude toward Yahweh, and obedient in his actions (50:4-5). Whereas Israel was stubborn, with a neck of iron and a forehead of bronze (48:4), the coming Servant would not hesitate to fulfill God's purpose for him (50:5b). It is no wonder that Jesus of Nazareth, Yahweh's perfect Servant, could say, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them" (Mt. 5:17). Jesus was the perfect Servant, and he perfectly fulfilled the commandments that Israel did not (cf. 48:18).

Furthermore, this coming Servant would suffer greatly. He would be beaten and abused (50:6; cf. 49:7). Nevertheless, his ultimate end would not be disgrace but glory. His determination would be unflagging, and God would vindicate him completely at last (50:7-9). Is it any wonder, then, that the resurrection of Jesus from the dead was understood by the apostles to be God's vindication of his Servant Jesus (Ac. 3:13-15; cf. 4:27, 30; 2:13-15, 26; 13:29-30)?

### **The Call to Hear the Servant (50:10-11)**

Already in the message to the exiles the polarization had begun between those who would hear and receive the Word of Yahweh and those who would scorn it. The Word of Yahweh and the word of his Servant were one (50:10a). To those who walked in darkness and had no light, they could trust in the integrity of Yahweh to make good on his promises (cf. Is. 9:2). They needed only to remain faithful to him (50:10b). To those who believed that they had sufficient light in their own resources and felt that they could control their own destinies without God's help, the only thing that awaited them was doom (50:11; He. 10:26-27).

## Zion's Salvation (51-54)

The next several oracles in the Book of Consolation reach a crescendo of glorious promise. If Yahweh promised to redeem his exiled people, the time for this redemption was near. Yet as before, the enigmatic figures of the Perfect Servant and the Failed Servant are strangely mixed in these promises of hope.

### Salvation is on the Way (51:1-16)

The voice of Yahweh through his prophet now appeals to the spiritually conscious among the exiles (50:1a, 7). If some of them were rebellious and doubtful (42:18-20; 43:22; 45:9-11; 46:8, 12; 48:1-2; 49:14), others were genuinely seeking the face of God. So, Yahweh calls upon them to consider his faithfulness to Abraham and Sarah, to whom he promised great progeny and for whom he fulfilled his oath through miraculous means (51:1b-2; cf. Ge. 12-21).<sup>128</sup> In the same way, he would fulfill his promise to restore Zion (51:3) while bringing justice to the nations (51:4-5; cf. 42:1). Even though the universe would eventually wear itself out (cf. Ps. 102:25-27), Yahweh and his salvation remained steadfast (51:6-8).

In his prayer for God's redemptive action, the prophet calls upon God to awake (51:9a). This metaphor, like the metaphor of calling upon God to arise, is typical poetic language which pleads for divine intervention (Ps. 3:7; 7:6; 9:19; 10:12; 35:23; 44:23; 68:1). The present crisis of exile is comparable to the ancient crisis at the Red Sea. There, Yahweh conquered the enemies of his people so that they crossed over safely (Ex. 13-15).<sup>129</sup> Now, his people needed him again to save them from the Mesopotamian overlords (51:9b-10). Since Yahweh had delivered his people before, they could be assured that he would do so again (51:11). He would comfort his people (51:12a; cf. 40:1). Their enemies were only as grass (51:12b; cf. 40:6-8). Yahweh had created his people, and he would save them (51:13a). The prisoners would be set free (51:13b-14), and God would inspire his Servant and shelter him until the storm of oppression had passed over (51:15-16; cf.

<sup>128</sup>It may be that the description of Abraham as "the rock" lies behind the statement of Jesus to Peter that he was a "rock" (cf. Mt. 16:18). Both Abraham and Peter stand as first generation models for the faithful, Abraham as the figure for the ancient faith of Israel and Peter as the figure for the new faith of Christians, cf. O. Cullmann, *Peter, Disciple, Apostle, Martyr* (London: SCM Press, 1953) 193.

<sup>129</sup>The imagery of Yahweh in conflict with a dragonlike creature appears in various places in the Old Testament (Ps. 74:13-14; 89:10; Is. 27:1; Job 9:13; 26:12-13; 40:19). It seems to have been stock poetic vocabulary in the ancient Near East, for one finds it also in the mythologies of Sumer, Babylon, Phoenicia, Canaan and Egypt, cf. M. Horsnell, *ISBE* (1986) III.459; P. Craigie, *Ugarit and the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983) 62-63; H. Gunkel, "Influence of Babylonian Mythology Upon the Creation Story," *Creation in the Old Testament*, ed. B. Anderson (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984) 34; W. Lambert, "A New Look at the Babylonian Background of Genesis," *The Bible in Its Literary Milieu*, ed. J. Maier and V. Tollers (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979) 285-297. The name Rahab, as a designation for the primeval monster, is common, along with other names, such as, Leviathan, Behemoth, Tannin, Yam, Nahar and Nahash.

49:2).<sup>130</sup> The people who thought they were abandoned by Yahweh (cf. 49:14) would be claimed as his own people (51:16b).

### **The Cup of Wrath Removed (51:17-23)**

Now, the ruined city of Jerusalem is called upon to awake, also (51:17a). She had drunk deeply from the cup of God's anger (51:17b). Inebriated and staggering under the heavy influence of God's wrath, there was no one to assist her wobbling gait (51:18-20). But the cup of anger from which she had been drinking would now be passed to Babylon, and Babylon, too, would drink deeply of the wine of God's wrath (51:21-23). Earlier, through Jeremiah, Yahweh had promised that all the nations, both Judah and her neighbors, would drink from this cup of divine anger (cf. Je. 25:15-29). The Apostle John drew from this same image to describe the anger of God against the godless forces of the Beast (cf. Rv. 14:9-13). So, the cup was passed and shall continue to be passed until all the kingdoms of this world have fallen and every knee will bow and every tongue confess the sovereignty of Yahweh alone (cf. 45:23-25).

### **The Redemption of Jerusalem (52:1-12)**

It is apparent, of course, that Zion, Jerusalem, and the community of exiles are one and the same. Literally, Zion was the temple mount. Literally, Jerusalem was the capital of the southern nation. Both of them, however, symbolized the community of Judahites who went into exile. Thus, when Zion and Jerusalem are personified in poetic imagery, the reader is to understand that the community of exiles is being addressed. This identification is important, for it illustrates in a poetic way the promise that the exiles once again will return to Jerusalem and worship on Mt. Zion.

Now, the community is promised that it would never again be terrorized by pagans (52:1). Judah's captivity would be turned (52:2), and like a slave, she would be bought back through an act of grace (52:3; cf. 50:1b). In ancient times, she had been a bondslave to the Egyptians. More recently, she was the vassal of Assyria. Now, she suffered under Babylon (52:4-5a). In a pagan land, the community of the faithful was compelled to listen to the blasphemy and ridicule of the foreign oppressors (52:5b).

Such times of oppression were almost over, however (52:6). Good news was being proclaimed, and the sovereign reign of God was about to begin (52:7). The redemption of Jerusalem was at hand (52:8-10). The exiles were summoned to

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<sup>130</sup>As in 49:2ff., the figure of the Perfect Servant is superimposed over the figure of the Collective Servant. The statements about the servant being hidden in God's hand are true both of Israel in exile and of Jesus in God's eternal purpose.

depart from Babylon in a holy procession, defended by the power of Yahweh who went before them and behind them, just as he did in the ancient exodus (52:11-12; cf. Ex. 13:20-22; 14:19-20).

So what is the modern reader to make of these promises? To be sure, the exiles did indeed depart from Babylon and return to Jerusalem. Cyrus did indeed become God's instrument to overthrow Babylon and decree that the Jews could return to their homeland. However, at the same time, many of the glowing promises did not come to pass. The promise that Jerusalem would never again be invaded by foreigners (cf. 52:1) must be measured against the various oppressions of history, particularly the desecrations of Zion by Antiochus IV Epiphanes (168 B.C.), the invasion of Jerusalem by Pompey the Great (63 B.C.), and the destruction of the city by Titus (70 A.D.). The prophet may have promised that Jerusalem would be a free city (cf. 52:2), but several hundred years later, the community of Jews in Jerusalem were still waiting for the "consolation of Israel" and the "redemption of Jerusalem" (Lk. 2:25, 38).

In light of this promise, it is not surprising that the earliest Christians understood the redemption of Jerusalem in spiritual terms. The "good news upon the mountains" was the preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ (cf. Ro. 10:14-15). The Jerusalem which was free was the Jerusalem from above (cf. Ga. 4:26), while the earthly Jerusalem remained in slavery (cf. Ga. 4:25). The departure from pagan Babylon symbolized the Christian's departure from the world of sin (2 Co. 6:17). This poetic identification between the holy mountain, the holy city and the holy people reaches its climax in the Apocalypse of John, when the people of God, the bride of the Lamb, is described as the holy city, the New Jerusalem (Rv. 21). They stand triumphant upon a spiritual Mt. Zion (Rv. 14:1). Babylon, the worldly culture which opposes God, will be destroyed in the judgment of God (Rv. 18).

### **The Fourth Servant Song (52:13--53:12)**

Now follows what has become for many the single most important passage in the Old Testament with respect to the ministry of Jesus of Nazareth. The failed mission of the Servant Collective has been held up to the exiles for examination and shame. The fully successful mission of the Perfect Servant, who is yet to come, has been anticipated. Yet, in spite of his ultimate success, the Perfect Servant would also be a figure of suffering (cf. 49:7a; 50:6). This suffering is now to be described in detail.

In public opinion, the coming Servant would seem to fail.<sup>131</sup> He would incite

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<sup>131</sup>The larger portion of the oracle is written in the Hebrew perfect (completed) tense, but especially if the passage has a messianic connotation, the burden of the oracle must be future. Thus, some interpreters speak of a "prophetic perfect" tense, that is, the tendency of the prophets to sometimes use the perfect tense for describing future events in

both admiration and horror (52:13-14). His work would be a priestly work (52:15a),<sup>132</sup> causing mute wonder and amazement from the nations and potentates of the world (52:15b). His mission would be so unusual that it would strain credulity in all who saw him (53:1), not the least of which were the Jewish people themselves (cf. Jn. 12:37-38; Ro. 10:16). His beauty would be in his gentle character, not his outward appearance (53:2-3). He would suffer greatly, empathizing so fully with the sorrow of the people that he would suffer vicariously for their sins (53:4-6).<sup>133</sup> In spite of his torture and abuse, he would not retaliate (53:7). Above all, he would suffer innocently and quietly (53:8-9; 1 Pe. 2:22-23). After he died, he would be given a grave with the wicked and the rich (cf. Mt. 27:57-60).

Was this innocent, vicarious suffering to be permitted by a holy God? Most certainly! In fact, it was precisely the will of God that this suffering should be accomplished (53:10a), because in it God would effect a sacrificial expiation (53:10b). Though the Servant would be cut off without descendants (cf. 53:8b), yet paradoxically, God would preserve for him posterity (53:10c). Though he would die a horrible death (53:8c), God would grant him prolonged life (53:10c). When the ordeal was over, vindication, victory and justification would be the result (53:11-12). Both Mark and Luke clearly understood this prophecy to be fulfilled in the Jesus of Nazareth who, in his passion, was "numbered with the transgressors" (Mk. 15:27 NIVmg; Lk. 22:37).

### New Jerusalem, the Reconciled Bride (54:1-17)

If the first acrostic in the Lamentation had depicted Jerusalem and her exiled citizens as a bereft widow (La. 1), now the city is called upon to burst into song. Though she has been cast in the role of a barren woman and a forsaken wife, God now promises her many children, so much so, that she will have to enlarge her dwellingplace by dispossessing other nations so as to house them all (54:1-3). Her disgrace of widowhood and estrangement will be over, because Yahweh, her Creator, is also her husband (cf. 50:1). He will receive her back again and will give to her children (54:4-8). Just as God punished the inhabitants of the earth in the great flood of Noah and then later covenanted never to destroy them again (cf. Ge. 9:8-11), so now he promises never again to destroy the people of Israel but to

order to emphasize the definiteness of their prediction.

<sup>132</sup>The LXX follows a lesser meaning of *nazah* (= to be amazed or startled) instead of the more usual meaning (= to sprinkle). This lesser meaning is followed by several English versions as well (RSV, NEB, NAB, ASVmg, NKJVmg, NIVmg), though not all (NIV, ASV, KJV, NKJV). The translators who make this choice deem that it fits better into the context than a priestly image. However, the priestly nuance seems to be equally appropriate in light of the vicarious suffering and intercession described later (cf. 53:10, 12b).

<sup>133</sup>While the primary meaning of the term "healed" in this synonymous parallelism refers to the healing of the wound of sin (cf. 57:18-19), it can also have a physical meaning with reference to the public ministry of Jesus, cf. Mt. 8:17.

establish for them perpetual peace (54:9-10). The city would be rebuilt with precious stones and jewels (54:11-12), and her citizens would be established in peaceful security (54:13-15). Even the smiths who forge weapons and the warriors who use them are under God's sovereign control, so Yahweh can make good on his promise of perpetual peace for Jerusalem. None of these weapons will be permitted to be used against her citizens (54:16-17).

Once more, the question arises as to how these stupendous promises are to be taken. Certainly in the known history of Israel, from the time of Cyrus until the present, Jerusalem has never existed under such terms of perpetual peace. St. Paul, of course, applies the proliferation of the children of Jerusalem to the evangelization of pagans with the Christian gospel (cf. Ga. 4:27). In the Apocalypse, the New Jerusalem is described in much the same terms as here in Isaiah, as an honored bride established with foundations and walls of precious stones and jewels (cf. Rv. 21:9-21). The vision of eternal peace is to be realized, not so much in earthly history, but in the afterlife (cf. Rv. 21:2-4, 27).

### **Salvation To The Thirsty (55-57)**

The mission of the Perfect Servant was far greater than simply to turn the hearts of the Israelites back to God, though of course, it was certainly to do that as well (cf. 49:5-6a). In its greater horizons, however, it was universal in scope, promising justice to the nations (42:1, 4, 6-7; 45:22; 49:6b; 51:4-5; 52:10). This universal mission envisioned the same thing as God's original promise to Abraham (Ge. 12:3) and his original purpose for Israel, the servant redeemed from Egypt (Ex. 19:5-6). Where Israel, the collective servant, failed terribly, the Perfect Servant would not fail. The next several oracles emphasize this hope for universal salvation.

It should be pointed out that between chapters 55 and 56 there is a geographical shift for the remainder of the book. The people who are addressed in chapters 40-55 are clearly in Babylon and are encouraged to prepare for the return home. Those who are addressed in chapters 56-66 seem to be in Palestine, probably shortly after the repatriation allowed by Cyrus in 538 B.C. It is for this reason that many scholars divide the Book of Isaiah into three distinct works, those of Isaiah ben-Amoz of Jerusalem (chapters 1-39), Deutero-Isaiah of Babylon (chapters 40-55), and Trito-Isaiah of Jerusalem (chapters 56-66). Others conclude that the sections of chapters 40-55 and chapters 56-66 belong to the same hand, though the geography has changed. The prevailing view is that Trito-Isaiah was written by the disciples (or a disciple) of Deutero-Isaiah. Of course, many conservatives continue to defend the view that the entire work was composed by a single Isaiah in the 8th century B.C., some two centuries before the exile (see the comments regarding authorship, pp. 71-75).

### Thirsting After Righteousness (55:1-13)

Building upon the message about the reconciling mission of the Perfect Servant, an open invitation is now offered to all who are hungry and thirsty (55:1). It is apparent, of course, that hunger and thirst are used here as metaphors for spiritual desire, not merely bodily needs. It is the entire person, not merely the physical aspect of humanness, that stands in need. Thus, the invitation is to come to the waters "that your soul may live" (55:3a).<sup>134</sup> It is not unlikely that the words of the Lord Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount concerning those who "hunger and thirst after righteousness" are drawn from this passage (Mt. 5:6).

For the first time in Deutero-Isaiah, the prophet turns to the promises in the Davidic covenant. Once, the citizens in the southern nation of Judah had believed they were eternally secure because of this covenant (cf. 2 Sa. 7:8-16; 22:51; 23:5a; Is. 37:35), and they had interpreted this security in a political way (cf. Is. 29:1-8; 31:4-5; Mic. 4:11-13; Ps. 46; 48). There were early warnings that such a royal theology, which was centered upon the dynasty of David, was not as unconditional as was popularly supposed (Am. 2:4-5; 6:1a; Mic. 3:10, 12). Nevertheless, the view persisted (Mic. 3:11; Zep. 1:12). Even by the time of Jeremiah, the assumption of invincibility was still alive and well (cf. Je. 6:14; 7:10; 8:11). When Jeremiah preached against the safety of Jerusalem, he was threatened with death because he "prophesied against this city" (26:10-11). Now Isaiah picks up the theme of the "unfailing kindnesses to David," a phrase drawn from 2 Samuel 22:51. If the royal theology seemed to have failed (cf. Ps. 89:34-45), were not the divine promises to David simply wasted words in the first place? The prophet here says, "No, indeed!" In fact, the unfailing kindnesses promised to David would yet be established (55:3b). His family line had not been destroyed, but it remained as a witness to God's faithfulness (55:4). In the end, the promises to David for Israel would truly come to pass (55:5).

In view of this hope, the call to seek Yahweh is issued with clarity and conviction (55:6-7). Who could have imagined that God's promises would be fulfilled in such a way, but of course, his divine ways are immeasurably higher than humans can conceive (55:8-9). His holy word is solid and sure, and his promises will not fail (55:10-11). The future was bright indeed (55:12-13)!

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<sup>134</sup>The *nephesh* (= soul) in Hebrew thought, which occurs some 755 times in the Old Testament, refers to the whole human person, particularly in the sense that the human person can neither acquire nor preserve life by him/herself. The human person as *nephesh* is full of need, desire, emotional excitability and vulnerability, and the concept of *nephesh* includes the inner life as well as the other aspects of humanness, cf., H. Wolff, *Anthropology of the Old Testament*, trans. M. Kohl (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1974) 10-25.

### **Salvation to the Nations (56:1-8)**

If indeed the remainder of the book of Isaiah envisions a setting following the return of the exiles from Babylon to Jerusalem, it is clear that all of the glorious promises which had been predicted had not come to fruition. The land was a place filled with corruption (56:9--59:15a) and devastation (63:7--64:12). Because the salvation which Yahweh had promised was so close at hand (cf. 51:5; 52:10), it was only appropriate for the returned exiles to live righteously (56:1), taking care to observe the statutes of Torah (56:2). It is clear, then, that the salvation which Yahweh promised had much greater scope than just repatriation. Yahweh's salvation had a spiritual dimension as well!

The sabbath was one of the few religious observances which could be performed without a temple, and the people were challenged to keep it with diligence. In fact, since the people were living in the midst of many foreigners, they had the unique opportunity to serve as witnesses to these non-Jews about Yahweh's saving grace (cf. 43:10, 12). In ancient times, foreigners and eunuchs had been excluded from certain levels of worship (cf. Ex. 12:43; Lv. 21:16-23; Dt. 23:1-6). Now, however, no one would be excluded (56:3). Those formerly considered to be misfits could be welcomed as true participants in worship if they would carefully follow God's Torah (56:4-7). The temple of Yahweh would indeed become a place of prayer for the nations.<sup>135</sup> The gathering of the exiles back to Palestine was not the end of Yahweh's saving work, for he would gather more than simply the Jews (56:8). This statement is obviously similar to Jesus' own words, "I have other sheep not of this sheep pen" (cf. Jn. 10:16).

### **Sinful Israel (56:9--57:13)**

The nature of true worship, which seeks after righteousness, is now contrasted with the actual state of affairs among the returned exiles, a state not greatly different than the religious deviations of their parents and grandparents. Because the shepherds and watchmen of the flock of Israel were full of carelessness and frivolous pursuits (56:10-13), the flock could be ravaged at will by any beasts that came along (56:9). The righteous among the exiles were being pressed beyond limit, some even to the point of death (57:1a). No one seemed to realize that God permitted their deaths so as to allow them a reprieve from the desperate evil of the times (57:1b-2).<sup>136</sup>

<sup>135</sup>When Jesus cleansed the temple while quoting Isaiah's words here (cf. Mk. 11:17), his anger was directed toward those who had taken the one place in the temple which was open to Gentiles for prayer and made it into an exchange market for animals and money. The fact that he quoted from Deutero-Isaiah in this way suggests that Jesus saw himself in the role of the Perfect Servant.

<sup>136</sup>The concept that the death of the suffering righteous is, in reality, a form of God's mercy demonstrates how difficult the times actually were. It should be pointed out that the translation of the text in 57:2 is particularly

With biting epithets of disdain, Yahweh summoned these leaders and those who followed them (57:3). Again, in following the religions of the Canaanites, they had mocked Yahweh by descending into the debauchery of the fertility cults and the practice of child sacrifice (57:3-7).<sup>137</sup> Because the nation was now filled with the symbols and practices of the pagans, God would have little choice but to bring judgment upon a people whose intense passion for religious deviation led them far from the pure worship of Yahweh (57:8-10). God would be compelled to punish them (57:11-13a).

The seriousness of their sins served as a warning. Those who continued to trust in the pantheon of the pagans would be scattered as if by the wind (57:13b). Only those who trusted in Yahweh would live to truly inherit Zion and the holy land (57:13c).

### **Healing for the Contrite (57:14-21)**

A new oracle begins, this time not addressed to the obstinate deviates, but rather, to those who would turn to Yahweh in true repentance and contrition. If these returned exiles thought that they had reached the end of the road by simply coming back to the holy land, they were mistaken. The true road of return (cf. 40:3) was to be found in a heartfelt return to Yahweh with an attitude of deep repentance (57:14-15a). It is the poor in spirit and the pure in heart, that is, those who realize they are spiritually bankrupt but who come to God with pure devotion, who will ascend the high and lofty hill to see God (cf. Ps. 24:3-6)!<sup>138</sup> To those who were crushed in spirit, Yahweh would give renewed strength, else they would succumb completely (57:15b-16). Though God's anger was displayed in his judgment against sin, he would also giving healing and comfort (57:17-19).<sup>139</sup> Only the wicked, who cannot cease in their restless quest for evil, would remain without God's *shalom*.

### **Fasting And Penitence (58-59)**

The remnant that returned from Babylon to Jerusalem had been promised

difficult, and there may well have been some textual disturbance, evidenced by a strange shift from the singular to the plural. Other English Versions have offered different renderings (cf. NAB, RSV), but we have followed the sense of the NIV.

<sup>137</sup>The Canaanite religions were filled with the imitative magic of sexuality. Since the gods and goddesses were believed to control the fertility of the soil by copulation, their worshipers engaged in sacred prostitution so as to induce the deities to mate and bring rain to the land. Furthermore, human sacrifice was associated with the worship of Chemosh, the Moabite deity, cf. P. Craigie and G. Wilson, "Religions: Canaanite," *ISBE* (1988) IV.95-101.

<sup>138</sup>Just as Jesus may have taken his statement concerning those who "hunger and thirst after righteousness" from 55:1-2, he may equally have taken his statement about "the poor in spirit" and "the pure in heart" from this passage (cf. Mt. 5:3, 8).

<sup>139</sup>Yet again, one hears the echoes of this passage in Jesus words concerning the blessedness of "those who mourn," since they shall be comforted (cf. Mt. 5:4).

great blessings from Yahweh, but those blessings had not yet materialized. Though the prophet had earlier envisioned cleansing and spiritual renewal for the people, this new life, also, had not been forthcoming. Yet, the people seemed religious in many ways. They followed many of the ancient rituals required by Torah as well as other additional religious practices. Still, their religious practices were superficial, and while they may have kept some aspects of the law, they had surely missed the spirit of the law. Thus, the next oracles address the nature of genuine piety and religion. Its theme bears a strong affinity to the sermons in Zechariah 7-8, which would have been given not much later than what is envisioned here.<sup>140</sup> The social consciousness of the oracle is similar to the message of James in the New Testament.

### **True Fasting (58:1-14)**

The occasion of this oracle was the observance of one or more of the proclaimed fasts. We know, for instance, that memorial fast days were proclaimed in the fourth, fifth, seventh and tenth months (cf. Zec. 7:4-5; 8:19), probably to commemorate the fall of Jerusalem (cf. 2 Kg. 25:3), the destruction of the temple (cf. Je. 52:12), the murder of Gedaliah (cf. 2 Kg. 25:23-25) and the first attack upon Jerusalem (cf. 2 Kg. 25:1).<sup>141</sup> These fasts, or at least some of them, had been observed by the exiles during the seventy years of captivity in Babylon as well as following their repatriation to Jerusalem (cf. Zec. 7:3-5). Yet, in spite of this expression of religion, the times were difficult for the repatriates. In their minds was the question, "Why does Yahweh not respond to our acute dilemma" (58:3)?

In view of this problem, the prophet announced that God did indeed have something to say about their circumstances (58:1a). The heart of the problem was that the people had continued in their rebellion and sin, the same rebellion and sin that drove them into exile in the first place (58:1b). Though their religious exercise seemed, on the surface, to indicate a desire to know God better (58:2-3), the bitter truth was that this expression of religion was largely superficial. Along with their religion, they also engaged in exploitation and brawling (58:4), oppression and slander (58:9b), and a willing neglect of the powerless and disadvantaged (58:6-7, 10a), even to the point of ignoring the needs of their own family members (58:7b). Fasting and religious expression, then, was quite meaningless in the presence of these sins of social injustice (58:4b-5). The kind of religious expression for which

<sup>140</sup>Of course, we do not know the precise period during which the oracles in this part of Isaiah were preached, but most scholars, even conservative ones, agree that they refer to a period not long after the repatriation from exile in 538 B.C. We are able to compute the dates of Zechariah's oracles accurately to within a day, and his oracle on fasting was given on December 7, 518 B.C., cf. J. Baldwin, *Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi [TOTC]* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1972) 29.

<sup>141</sup>C. and E. Meyers, *Haggai, Zechariah 1-8 [AB]* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1987) 433-434.

God looks is that which reaches out to help those who are in desperate need (58:6-7).<sup>142</sup> When such religious expression is practiced, then the blessings and attention of God would come (58:8-9a). The righteousness of God must be brought into the arena of everyday life, and when it is, his benefits would overflow (58:9b-11). Yahweh would provide the resources to rebuild the fallen city of Jerusalem (58:12), and he would send to them the wholeness for which they craved (58:13-14).

### **Social Injustice and the Attention of God (59:1-15a)**

If the question among the returned exiles was, "Why does not Yahweh listen to us?" (58:3), then the answer was that the rampant sins of social injustice among the people prevented him from listening to them (59:1-2). So long as they practiced treachery, dishonesty, slander, and so long as they were primarily interested in self-gain rather than justice, God refused to listen to them (59:3-4). Vipers' eggs and the spider's web become the metaphors intended to illustrate the deliberate evils just described (59:5). Yet, the advantage that such unscrupulous people sought would not be gained in the end (59:6a). The lives of such people are ever evil (59:6b-8), and St. Paul is quite correct in realizing that this description is not merely appropriate for the sins of the repatriated exiles. It is equally characteristic of humankind as a whole (cf. Ro. 3:15-17).

Because this is fallen human nature, justice is ever beyond human reach (59:9-11). Women and men grope in darkness for God and for justice, growling and moaning all the while. There is a clear recognition and confession of this desperate sinfulness (59:12-15a). Human depravity, as Reinhold Niebuhr once said, is the only empirically verifiable doctrine in the Bible. So, what is the solution? If the returned exiles were so hopelessly entangled with inward depravity and sin, and if in their depravity they only mirrored the moral dilemma of all people, what was to be done? Yahweh proclaimed his answer in the next oracle.

### **Salvation by Grace (59:15b-21)**

The only solution to this universal moral depravity would be an act of God's divine grace. The people were powerless to help themselves, so Yahweh declared that in the absence of anyone else to set right the human dilemma (59:15b-16a), he would do it himself (59:16b). He not only would demand righteousness, he would bring righteousness and salvation with his own arm!

Like a mighty warrior armed for battle, Yahweh would come with the garments of redemption. His breastplate would be righteousness, his helmet

<sup>142</sup>If James did not have this specific passage in mind, he certainly upheld the spirit of the passage when he said, "Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress... (Ja. 1:27a). Zechariah, of course, says essentially the same thing to the same people (Zec. 7:8-10).

salvation (59:17a).<sup>143</sup> He would dispense judgment toward all people, not merely to those of the Jewish race but also to those in "the West," considered to be the far reaches of the ancient world. Those who persisted in their wicked behavior would receive their just deserts (59:17b-19). Yet, to those who repented of their sins in humility, Yahweh would offer redemption and longevity (59:20). They would be filled with both the Holy Spirit and the enduring Word of God (59:21). It is interesting to observe that this promise of the gift of the Holy Spirit, which comes as a result of genuine penitence, is exactly parallel to Peter's sermon at Pentecost, "Repent....and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Ac. 2:38).

## The New Zion (60-62)

If in spite of the nation's continuing sinfulness Yahweh determined to save them by grace (59:15b-17, 20-21), the prophet now describes what Jerusalem would be like after this great redemptive act. In the most breathtaking and glowing terms, he announces that Zion would be rebuilt and firmly established so that she would become the capital of the world.

## Zion, the Holy City of Yahweh (60:1-22)

As described earlier, the entities of Jerusalem, Zion and the people of God have become virtually interchangeable (see comments at 52:1-12). In the restoration, the blessing and presence of Yahweh would rise over the city like the sun rising over the darkened earth in the early morning (60:1-2). Though the nation had stumbled in darkness, the light of divine glory would surely come (cf. 59:9-10). The nations of the world, for whom the Perfect Servant had established justice, would visit the holy city, bearing in their arms the sons and daughters of Israel (60:3-4). Joy, wealth and splendor would be the hallmarks of restored Jerusalem (60:5-9). Her walls would be rebuilt by foreigners, and the kings of the nations would serve her (60:10a). Though the exile had been a heavy penalty indeed, Zion's restoration to divine favor would establish the city as the capital of the world (60:10-12).<sup>144</sup>

Not only would the city be rebuilt, but the temple as well. All of the rich woods of Lebanon would be crafted into worthy furnishings for the holy place of Yahweh (60:13). Those who had formerly oppressed God's people would now bow before them, for they would realize that, once again, Zion was the throne of the

<sup>143</sup>Of course, Paul in the New Testament employs this identical language in urging the Ephesians to imitate God in their approach to the world (cf. Ep. 6:13-17).

<sup>144</sup>The open gates of the holy city and the processional of the potentates of the nations bringing tribute to Jerusalem are employed in the Apocalypse of John to describe the glory of the heavenly city, New Jerusalem (cf. Re. 21:24-26).

Sovereign God (60:14). The city would be a place of riches, peace and righteousness (60:15-18a);<sup>145</sup> her walls would be called *Salvation* and her gates *Praise* (60:18:b). Since the glory of Yahweh had risen over the city like the sun, there was no longer any need for the traditional lights in the solar system (60:19-20).<sup>146</sup> The people of God would live in the city forever in prosperity and splendor (60:21-22).

### **The Time of Divine Favor (61:1-11)**

Once again, the voice of the Perfect Servant is raised (61:1-4).<sup>147</sup> In anticipating the wonderful time of restoration and blessing, the anointed Servant announces that he has taken up the mission of Yahweh to preach good news to the poor. His ministry will herald the dawn of the time of fulfillment and will inaugurate the year of Yahweh's favor. The ruins would be rebuilt and the devastated places restored.<sup>148</sup> In the restoration, the ancient ideal of God's people serving as priests for the nations would be realized (cf. Ex. 19:6), and the citizens of the nations would serve the people of God (61:5-6).<sup>149</sup> Abundant prosperity, described as the legacy of the firstborn (61:7; cf. Dt. 21:17), would be theirs, and they would be honored among the nations under an eternal covenant (61:8-9). The personified city of Zion rejoices in her salvation as the newly married bride of God (61:10-11).

### **The City No Longer Deserted (62:1-12)**

If the wrenching poem in Lamentations had described the aftermath of Babylon's invasion as leaving Jerusalem like a bereft widow, deserted and alone (La.

<sup>145</sup> Again, it is from this passage that John draws his description of the New Jerusalem as a place in which nothing impure will ever enter (cf. Re. 21:27).

<sup>146</sup> Here also, the imagery is adopted by John in describing the New Jerusalem as a place not needing the sun or moon (cf. Re. 21:23; 22:5). Furthermore, Isaiah's words, "Your days of sorrow will end," are fitting parallels to John's, "There will be no more mourning or crying or pain" (Re. 21:4).

<sup>147</sup> Though this passage is not usually reckoned with the traditional four songs of the Servant, it certainly "breathes the same sentiments and almost certainly was intended by its author to express the mind and mission of the Servant of the Songs," cf. Bruce, 84.

<sup>148</sup> Small wonder that when Jesus read this very passage in his own synagogue in Nazareth, and concluded with the saying, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing," his audience was amazed and their eyes were riveted upon him (Lk. 4:16-22). Of course, that the time of divine favor was inaugurated in the ministry of Jesus, the Perfect Servant of Yahweh, does not discount the fact that in the New Testament the entire complex of events associated with the consummation of history embrace both the first and the second advent of Jesus. Thus, it has been aptly pointed out that Jesus carefully divided the passage, stopping his reading in the middle of a Hebrew sentence (Is. 61:2a). He had come to announce the year of divine favor, but he had not yet come to announce the day of vengeance. The one was to be associated with his first advent, the other with his second, cf. W. Liefeld, "Luke," EBC (1984) VIII.867.

<sup>149</sup> In the Apocalypse of John, of course, the fact that God's people would serve as rulers and priests over the nations is a recurring theme (cf. Re. 1:6; 5:10; 20:6).

1:1), now the fortunes of the city will be entirely reversed. Though once laden with sin, in the restoration she would blaze forth in righteousness and redemptive splendor (62:1-3). No longer would she be a widow, deserted and desolate, but she would be a precious wife, married to God (62:4-5).<sup>150</sup> In anticipation of this glorious future, the prayer-watchmen of Israel should never cease to petition God for the fulfillment of his wonderful promises (62:6-7). His divine oath was firm, and the eternal security of the city would surely be established (62:8-9). The Savior was coming, and the people must prepare themselves for his arrival (62:10-11). When he came, his people would be redeemed and holy. They would be sought after instead of rejected. The city would be filled with citizens and no longer abandoned and deserted (62:12).

## **Judgment, Salvation And Hope (63-66)**

The closing oracles of the Book of Isaiah resonate with the dual themes of judgment upon the disobedient and unrepentant and salvation by divine grace to the wayward people of God, at least to those who will receive it.

### **The Time of Vengeance and Redemption (63:1-6)**

The expression "Day of Yahweh" was a coinage which the pre-exilic prophets used to describe the time of God's divine intervention in human history. Originally, it anticipated the historical judgment of God upon Israel in the exile (cf. Am. 5:18-20; Is. 2:12ff.; Zep. 1:7ff., 14ff.; 2:2-3; 3:8).<sup>151</sup> Now, of course, the exile had been completed, but the coinage "Day of Yahweh" or similar phrases continued in usage by the later prophets as a description of the consummation of history through the intervention of God. Here, Isaiah speaks of "the day of vengeance" (63:4), and it is apparent that he is drawing upon this "Day of Yahweh" tradition.

The time of divine intervention will be both a day of judgment and salvation. The godless nations will be trampled under the feet of God as though they were grapes for the winepress (63:1-3, 6).<sup>152</sup> That God is pictured as coming from Bozrah, the fortified capital of Edom, may only mean that Edom is a symbol of the non-Israelite nations (cf. Is. 34:2, 5-15). The name Edom itself is a play on words, since the name means "red," and Bozrah was famous in ancient times for its export of dyed garments. Yet God comes not only as a mighty warrior to judge the godless,

<sup>150</sup>Once again, it should be pointed out that John's vision of the New Jerusalem as the Lamb's wife owes its primary imagery to the Old Testament (cf. Re. 19:7-9; 21:2, 9; 22:17).

<sup>151</sup>It is apparent, of course, that Amos did not originate the expression, but rather, confronted the popular idea that it referred strictly to victory for Israel, cf. E. Jenni, "Day of the Lord," *IDB* (1962) I.784.

<sup>152</sup>The imagery of juice-stained clothing as a metaphor for garments drenched in human blood is revived in the Apocalypse of John (Re. 14:19-20; 19:13, 15b).

he also comes as a warrior to save his people (63:1b). His divine intervention in history is both a time of vengeance and of redemption (63:4).<sup>153</sup> In his acts of judgment and salvation, he acts alone as the sovereign God (63:5; cf. 59:16). Among the nations, there is no genuine inclination toward justice nor any resources for salvation. If justice is to be meted out to the wicked and if salvation is to be given to the poor, then God must do it alone. Only he is able to do so.

### **The Past and the Present (63:7--64:12)**

Now follows a lengthy section of praise and prayer which recalls Yahweh's past mighty acts on behalf of Israel while pleading for his renewed attention in Judah's present dilemma. Such a catalogue of Israelite history, followed by a plea for mercy in the present, is a common enough theme in the Psalms (i.e., Ps. 44, 78, 89, 105, 106, 107). The praise section is designated as a tribute to Yahweh's *hesed* (= the faithful love of the LORD), and it describes God's gracious choice of the nation in Egypt (63:7-8). The exodus from Egypt was his initial saving act, for he empathized with the people's slavery and bondage (63:9).<sup>154</sup> Nevertheless, though Yahweh counted on his chosen people to be faithful (63:8), they rebelled against him, and for their rebellion he delivered them over to exile (63:10). In the bondage of Babylonian exile, the people once more cried out as they had done during their ancient slavery in Egypt. They remembered their history, and the power of the Holy Spirit among them during the exodus from Egypt, the sojourn in the desert, and the conquest of Canaan (63:11-14).

In view of this memory, a deeply sincere prayer of penitence was in order. This plea calls upon God to listen to the misery of his people, emphasizing that the repatriated exiles, unlike the pagan nations, were his people indeed (63:15-19).<sup>155</sup>

<sup>153</sup> It is interesting to note that the prophet consistently speaks of the time of redemption and favor as a "year" and the time of judgment as a "day" (cf. 61:2; 63:4). While such language might only be due to a variation in the poetic image, it might also suggest that the era of salvation is more lengthy while the period of judgment is quite short. If so, it would harmonize well with the New Testament, which envisions the entire age of the church as the time of divine favor and grace, while the judgment at the end of the age is abrupt and intentionally shortened for the survival of God's people (cf. Mt. 24:22).

<sup>154</sup> The Masoretic Text, followed by the NIV, KJV, NASB, RSV and ASV, refers to the *Mal'ak Panaw* (= the angel of his face), an expression which describes the same theophany as the designation *Mal'ak Yahweh* (= Angel of the LORD). This figure is somewhat fluid inasmuch as at times it seems to be distinguishable from God (i.e., Ge. 16:11) and at other times merges into God (i.e., Ex. 3:2-4). The exodus accounts clearly describe this messenger as the vehicle of God's saving acts (Ex. 14:19; 23:20-23; Nu. 20:16). In another passage, Yahweh tells Moses that he will send his *panim* (= face) to go before the people (Ex. 33:12-15). The passage here in Isaiah conflates these two ideas so that the angel is the face of God, cf. E. Young, *The Book of Isaiah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972) III.481-482. Oddly enough, the LXX rendering is quite different in that it clearly distinguishes the angel from God: "Not an ambassador nor an angel, but he himself saved them" (followed in the NAB and NEB).

<sup>155</sup> On the basis of 63:16, it has been suggested by some that the prayer was not composed by the Jews, but rather, by the Samaritans who were being denied their rightful place among the Jewish repatriates, cf. N. Snaith, "Isaiah 40-66: A Study of the Teaching of the Second Isaiah and Its Consequences," *Studies on the Second Part of Isaiah*, ed.

Intercession is made for God to act through his mighty power (64:1-3). God's nature is to help those who wait upon him (64:4; cf. 40:31; 49:23b).<sup>156</sup> Still, the people are compelled to freely acknowledge their sin and depravity. In view of this depravity, the people pose the critical question, "How can we be saved" (64:5-7)? It is apparent that salvation hinges upon the mercy of God, not the merit of his people. He has sovereign control, just as a potter does over his clay, and it is up to him to rectify the power of sin, since his people are powerless to do so themselves (64:8-9). Though they are now back in the holy land, the repatriates can see only the desolation and ruin of their former land, city and temple (64:10-11). Would God see their plight, or would he remain silent to their pitiful cries for help (64:11-12)? That was the question!

### **Salvation by Grace, but Judgment to the Unrepentant (65:1-16)**

If salvation by grace was what was needed, salvation by grace was God's gift to give. This grace was especially demonstrated by God's action in revealing himself to those who were not even seeking for him (65:1), a self-revelation which would come as part of the mission of the perfect Servant (cf. 42:4; 49:6b).<sup>157</sup> In contrast, God's overtures to Israel had been repeatedly rebuffed (65:2), for the people had broken his covenant again and again while exhibiting a hypocritical "holier-than-thou" attitude toward the nations (65:3-5). What was Yahweh to do to this incorrigible people? His covenant demanded that he repay them for their many sins (65:6-7). In the exile he had certainly done that. Yet, he also recognized that among this nation of rebels there was a remnant of faith, like a few good grapes on an unproductive vine. Consequently, for the sake of the few good grapes, he would not destroy the vine completely (65:8). The promises of blessing would indeed be fulfilled to this remnant of faith (65:9-10). As for those who continued in their rebellion and unrepentant ways, God determined to destroy them in accord with his covenant curses (65:11-12). The remnant of faith would be rewarded, while the unrepentant would be cursed (65:13-16).<sup>158</sup> In the end, then, it is apparent that the promises are to be fulfilled, not to the nation as a whole, but to the remnant of

Orlinsky and Snaith (Leiden: Brill, 1967) 235. However, it seems more likely that 63:16 only points out that God's living fatherhood of Israel is qualitatively different than the fatherhood of the deceased Abraham or Jacob, cf. Westermann, 393. In any case, 63:17 directly speaks of the "tribes that are your (God's) inheritance," and this surely could not refer to the Samaritans.

<sup>156</sup>As is well known, Paul paraphrases 64:4 in 1 Co. 2:9. It is apparent that he understands the salvation for which the ancient people waited to have been fulfilled in Christ, since, as he said, "God has revealed it to us by his Spirit."

<sup>157</sup>St. Paul applies 65:1 directly to the Gentiles who, in response to the mission of the perfect Servant to the nations, would be turned to God (cf. Ro. 10:20). Paul uses 65:2, of course, as descriptive of the Jews themselves.

<sup>158</sup>The idiom of receiving "another name" is employed by John in the Apocalypse to describe the honor bestowed upon the overcomer (cf. Re. 2:17b).

faith.<sup>159</sup>

### **The New Heavens and New Earth (65:17-25)**

To this remnant of faith would be given a new and breath-taking creation. The entire heavens and earth would be created new (65:17). A new Jerusalem would be created as well (65:18-19), and the description given here continues to develop the former vision of the new Zion (60). Longevity of life would be the norm (65:20), and farming would be prosperous (65:21-22). The entire land would be a place of peace, extending even to the animals (65:23-25). The promised downfall of the treacherous serpent would finally come to pass (cf. Ge. 3:14-15).

This vision of the new universe has been subjected to various interpretations, even among those who accept a high view of Scripture. Some identify it with a literal era of peace at the end of the age, usually called the millennium because of the apocalyptic reference to a thousand years found in the Revelation of John.<sup>160</sup> Others, including the present writer, believe that it speaks in earthly metaphors of the final state of the righteous after history has been concluded and after the final judgments upon the world have been completed.<sup>161</sup> Still others do not understand the passage as referring to the final state at the end of the age at all, but rather, they take it to be a metaphor for the blessings bestowed upon the church within history.<sup>162</sup> Thus, some press for a severe literalism and others for thorough-going spiritualism in interpretation. It seems to the present writer that both approaches fail to do justice to the New Testament writers, who sometimes take such passages quite literally and at other times in a spiritual way. Perhaps the perspective of St. Paul should be remembered that, in the areas of eschatology, we see the future imperfectly (cf. 1 Co. 13:12).

### **Judgment and Hope (66:1-24)**

The final oracle of the book continues the anticipation of punishment and redemption. Yahweh rules sovereignly over the world (66:1-2a; cf. 2 Chr. 6:18), but

<sup>159</sup>Of course, the vocabulary "remnant of faith" does not appear here in Isaiah, but the concept of the remnant, which is found in the earlier part of the book (10:20-22; 11:11, 16; 28:5), seems to be in view here as describing the faithful who exist within the larger body of Jews. Even more to the point, the remnant which returned as repatriates were, quite obviously, not all people of faith. It was the people of repentance and faith whom God intended to reward.

<sup>160</sup>This is the position of most premillennialists and dispensationalists, and can be found in most of their works, as well as in the Scofield Reference Bible (loc. cit.). Oddly enough, the Scofield Reference Bible contains the highly questionable interpretation that 65:17 refers to the final state while 65:18-25 refers to the millennium which precedes it. Such an interpretation creates an unwarranted bifurcation of the passage and can hardly be correct.

<sup>161</sup>Amillennialists commonly take this position, cf. A. Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979) 201-203. However, premillennialists also sometimes take this position, cf. Grogan, 15.

<sup>162</sup>Postmillennialists generally follow this approach, cf. L. Boettner, *The Millennium* (USA: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1957) 89.

his attention is especially directed toward the penitent in heart (66:2b). Those who engage in religion without contrition or who practice ritual without humility are like the worst covenant-breakers in the land (66:3). To such hypocrites God would bring judgment (66:4), especially upon those who, for their religion's sake, persecute the people of simple faith (66:5-6). Zion, as the symbol of God's people, was told that she would have a great increase in her children (cf. 54:1-3), and now this promise is reemphasized (66:7-11). The city would be filled with peace and wealth, and her citizens would be comforted (66:12-13). God would cause his redeemed people to flourish, but his enemies would be slain (66:14-16).

The Book of Isaiah ends in prose, once again consigning the covenant-breakers to doom (66:17).<sup>163</sup> The nations will be called to witness the glory of God, and some of them will even be chosen to serve as priests and Levites (66:18-21). The new universe will endure forever as all the people of the earth give adoration and worship to Yahweh (66:22-23). The rebels who refused to acknowledge God will be consigned to what John will later call the "second death" (66:24; cf. Re. 20:14).

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<sup>163</sup>The "gardens" in 66:17 and 65:3 probably refer to Canaanite high places for pagan worship.