

# OpenTheo

## Isaiah: Chapter-by-Chapter Commentary

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## **Transcript**

Isaiah stands at the head of the major prophets, a group that includes Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and usually Daniel. They are referred to as the major prophets on account of the length of the prophetic books named after them, not necessarily on account of their personal importance. While the Book of Isaiah is the longest of the major prophets by chapters, it is only the third longest of the books in Hebrew words, after Jeremiah and Ezekiel.

However, its prominence in the canonical imagination is pervasive and profound. With the Book of the Psalms, it's easily the book that is most cited or alluded to within the New Testament, and has even been considered as a fifth gospel by various figures over church history, on account of the prominence of its witness to the anticipated salvation of the Lord. Despite its prominence and the brilliance of its testimony to the Lord's eschatological deliverance and establishment of his people, the Book of Isaiah presents significant challenges for its interpreters, for whom it can be quite an unwieldy book.

Chief among these challenges is the fact that the prophecies of Isaiah speak to and across such a wide span of historical contexts. The first 39 chapters of the book seem to speak into various historical contexts that are very immediate over the period of Isaiah's ministry. This is a period dominated by the growing threat of Assyria, beginning around 740 BC, and including events such as the Syro-Ephraimite War, the overthrow of the Northern Kingdom of Israel, and Sennacherib's invasion of Judah and the unsuccessful siege of Jerusalem around 701 BC.

The historical setting of the message of the later chapters, however, seems to differ. Chapters 40-55 appear to speak into a context of exile in Babylon, from around 605 BC, when a small initial group of exiles from Judah's nobility, including people like Daniel, were taken, to 539 BC, when Babylon was defeated, Cyrus made his decree, and the first Jews returned to the land. The concluding chapters, generally reckoned from chapter 56-66, are, many scholars have argued, more related to the period of the earlier return, in the concluding decades of the 6th century BC, during the Persian period.

In addition to speaking to different contexts, these chapters also seem to be part of broader literary structures that suggest that they are to some degree distinct bodies of

material. Even by the 12th century, as John Goldingay notes, the Jewish scholar Abraham Ibn Ezra was already noting the existence of a pronounced seam within the material of the Book of Isaiah, and suggesting that the book might be the product of two different authors, one who wrote chapters 1-39, and another who wrote the later chapters. In 1892, the scholar Bernhard Duhm argued that the concluding chapters of the book, after chapter 56, represented a further body of material, one that presupposes a temple that is either rebuilt, or in the process of being so.

This understanding of Isaiah, held in some form or other by a large majority of scholars, typically speaks of 1st, or Proto-Isaiah, chapters 1-39, 2nd, or Deutero-Isaiah, chapters 40-55, and 3rd, or Trito-Isaiah, chapters 56-66. These three Isaiahs refer principally to different sections or sources of the book, different layers of its composition, rather than to three different individual authors. While the first part of the book is attributed to Isaiah the Sememath, some scholars argue that the last proposed section of the book is the assembled work of various authors.

While this theory of three Isaiahs is strongly associated with the scepticism of higher critical liberal scholarship, we ought to recognise that the questions that give rise to it aren't questions that depend entirely upon liberal assumptions about scripture for their force. While liberals, for instance, might doubt the existence of true predictive prophecy, and rule out the declaration of Cyrus' name in advance of his birth, in Isaiah chapters 44 and 45 as impossible, the force of the questions doesn't merely dissipate for those with a belief in predictive prophecy. There is at least one biblical instance of a prophecy of an individual's name long before his birth, in 1 Kings 13, verse 2, where Josiah's name and his actions in Bethel are foretold to Jeroboam the son of Nebat almost 300 years before Josiah's birth.

In that instance, the foretelling of the name of the figure is clearly part of the prophecy. Exegetically, however, although some might place a lot of emphasis upon Isaiah 45, verses 3-4, it's not immediately obvious that the Lord is foretelling Cyrus' name there. There is also the fact that, rather than presuming a situation that wouldn't make full sense until about 150 years later, the text seems to speak as if it were addressing a live situation, with events already set in motion by the Lord.

While the historical period of Isaiah's ministry lay under the shadow of the Neo-Assyrian Empire, chapters 40-55 seem to presuppose a situation of Babylonian power and Jewish captivity. Some might see this as akin to delivering prophecies about the fall of communist Russia around the time of the American Civil War and the Pax Britannica. Even if we believe in predictive prophecy, that God could reveal such events and names, there is still the tricky question of what sort of sense such prophecies would make to their first hearers at a time when the world order looked extremely different, pressing the question of whether God would reveal events in such a manner.

Perhaps the book of Isaiah, like the Psalms of David or the Proverbs of Solomon, is a book that takes its name from the originator of a tradition or body of material, and its contents are not exclusively written by the man to whom it is more directly attributed. Such arguments have persuaded most scholars. However, there is vigorous pushback from some more conservative commentators, and this pushback is also moving with some of the grain of more general scholarship from the late 20th century onwards.

This scholarship, while maintaining the hypothesis of different sources, is much more inclined to place its accent upon the unity of the material of the book in its final canonical form. Such a position is most associated with the work of Brevard Charles, who published his commentary on Isaiah in 2001. Charles, and those associated with his school of biblical scholarship of canonical criticism, emphasised the final received form of the text over the disparate textual layers and sources that many higher critical scholars have prioritised in a manner that fractured the canonical text.

While in Charles' understanding the text had a prehistory of formation from various sources and through the hands of various editors or redactors, and has different blocks of material within it, the final canonical form as a single book has an integrity, unity, coherence and authority that warrants its centrality as the proper object of biblical scholarship. This recognition encourages appreciation of the ways in which the book of Isaiah, even were we to accept the existence of textual seams within it, nonetheless exhibits a literary unity with connections and structures to be observed across all of its material, not merely in component sections. Conservative scholars like Alec Matthea, challenging the hypothesis of three different Isaiahs, have questioned the strength of some of the assumptions being made by advocates of that position.

As Matthea observes, the shadow of Babylon has fallen over the face of the text before chapter 40 begins. While Judah's relations with Babylon were friendly for much of the period of Isaiah's ministry, and they even conspired together in their foreign policies, chapter 39 very naturally anticipates the period of Babylonian dominance, directly foretelling the Babylonian captivity that provides the context of the chapters that follow. The message concerning Babylon and the return from captivity, Matthea argues, also presupposes a context of faithful opposition to idolatrous practice within the land, a context that existed prior to the Babylonian captivity.

The movement from the Assyrian to the Babylonian and then on to the Persian period might not be as unreasonable as many think. Besides this, there is strong textual and other evidence that the book of Isaiah was treated as a unity from the time prior to Christ, with no actual seam in the text whatsoever between chapters 39 and 40 in some of our earliest copies. For Christians, there is also the further consideration that the New Testament routinely refers to the book in a way that seems to assume single authorship.

For instance, in John chapter 12, verses from so-called first and second Isaiah are both

referred to, but are both spoken of as the words of Isaiah. Isaiah prophesied over the reigns of at least four kings of the southern kingdom of Judah, Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah. His ministry seems to have begun in the 740s BC and he was active until at least the end of the 8th century.

This period was one of great upheaval in the region, with the rising power of Assyria overwhelming the northern kingdom and almost the southern kingdom too. Assyria's regional dominance would last for almost the entirety of the 7th century as well, before their defeat at the hand of the Babylonians. While Judah and Israel had benefited from a period of Assyrian weakness up until the end of the 750s BC, Assyria's power was in the ascendancy after that.

With the accession of Tiglath-Pileser III to the throne, the northern kingdom of Israel, a tributary to Assyria, faced an existential threat to its north, losing territory to the Assyrians in the years that followed. The question of foreign policy was a keen one for both the northern and southern kingdoms in the decades that immediately followed. Around 735 BC, Israel under Pekah the son of Remeliah and Aram or Syria under Rezin the king of Damascus, sought to make a stand against the Neo-Assyrian Empire.

However, Ahaz the king of Judah refused to join them, so Israel and Syria sought to bring Judah to heel. They inflicted devastating losses upon Judah and even besieged Jerusalem in the Syro-Ephraimite war that followed. Ahaz, fearing the overthrow of his kingdom, appealed to Tiglath-Pileser and Assyria for aid, paying them to intervene against Aram and Israel.

Refusing to heed the counsel of the prophet, Judah ended up creating a rod for its own back. The Assyrians defeated Damascus and Pekah was assassinated. However, Ahaz entered into a deeply compromising treaty with Assyria and also imported elements of the pagan worship of Damascus, establishing an altar built according to the pattern of an altar in Damascus in the temple in Jerusalem.

The Assyrians would later destroy the northern kingdom and deport its people. Israel fell to the Assyrians at the end of the reign of Tiglath-Pileser's successor Shalmaneser, or at the very beginning of his successor Sargon's reign, around 722 BC. Perhaps recognising that the imperial hunger of Assyria had not been assuaged, Hezekiah, Ahaz's successor, shifted Judah's foreign policy, looking to the southern power of Egypt for aid instead.

After Sargon fell in battle in 706 BC, Sennacherib became ruler of Assyria and launched a series of devastating campaigns in the region. In 701 BC, the threat all but overwhelmed Judah as Jerusalem almost fell in Sennacherib's siege. The prophet Isaiah lived in eventful days, times during which it might have been difficult for Judah, faced with the might of the northern alliance of Syria and Israel and the great monster of Assyria, to heed Isaiah's message, holding its nerve and trusting in the Lord.

The book of Isaiah begins with a bang, summoning the heavens and the earth to bear witness and delivering a searing indictment of the nation of Judah. Their land now lies desolate, their cities burned with fire, with only the smallest number of survivors left. Had the Lord not mercifully spared them from utter destruction, they would have been as devastated as the ancient cities of the plain, to which the prophet proceeds to compare them.

The chief among the five cities of the plain, Solomon and Gomorrah, were the paradigmatic people of the land, destroyed by the Lord for their cruelty, wickedness and perversity, for which the Canaanites would later be vomited out of the land. In Genesis, the text juxtaposes the hospitality of Abraham in chapter 18 with the failed hospitality of Lot and the wicked inhospitality of the Sodomites in chapter 19. The story of the hospitality of Abraham culminates in the barren Sarah being made fruitful, while the Lord rains sulfur and fire down on Sodom.

And, unable to leave the ways of Sodom behind them, Lot's wife is turned into a pillar of salt and his daughters have incestuous relationships with their father. The pruned sexuality and generous hospitality of the recently circumcised Abraham is contrasted with the wild and perverse sexual behavior and the violent inhospitality of the Sodomites, with one being made fruitful and blessed and the other barren and cursed. The literary context and framing of the story of Sodom in Genesis foregrounds its significance for the subsequent memory of Israel.

Immediately after the deep formative event of the gift of circumcision as the sign of the covenant with Abraham, the visitation of the angels and the annunciation of the birth of the promised seed, Isaac, Sodom and its ways were directly and sharply contrasted with the ways that should characterize Israel. Sodom's destruction was a great historical landmark, a signal example of what Israel was to reject, and a warning of what would befall them if they failed to do so. One of the darkest moments of Israel's history occurred in Judges chapter 19 as the city of Gibeah behaved in a manner reminiscent of Sodom and suffered a similar fate.

We all typically presume ourselves to be the good guys in the dramas in which we play a part. The story of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah was a classic goodies versus baddies story. The wicked Sodomites, like the Canaanites after them, were wiped out so that faithful Abraham and his faithful descendants could take their place.

Israel would probably have been accustomed to telling its history in a way that presented the city of Sodom as a prominent foil of their identity as the descendants of Abraham. Isaiah's recollection of Sodom is an explosive deployment of the foundational narratives of Judah's history. Rather than associating Judah with the one that they considered their father, Abraham, Isaiah highlights their resemblance to the wicked former peoples of the land whom the Lord dispossessed.



Not only does Judah's likeness to the Sodomites invite the Lord's destructive judgement and their cutting off from the land, it also provokes a sacrificial crisis. When they are behaving like Sodomites, far from being received with divine pleasure, even Judah's multitudinous sacrifices and prayers become an abomination, a persistent stink in the nose of the Lord as we see in verses 11-15. Mashiach HaBertal observes that sacrifice as offering always involves the potential of rejection.

Ritual was intended to provide a shield, an assurance to the offerer. As he writes, the fatal possibility of rejection gives rise to an important function of ritual, successful transfer. Ritual is a prescribed procedure meant to guarantee the transfer's success.

Adherence to detailed routine makes the passage from laying down to acceptance less fraught. Ritual is thus a protocol that protects from the risk of rejection. Isaiah's challenge to Judah reopens the sacrificial crisis that the rituals of the Levitical system were presumed to resolve.

Far from pacifying the Lord, the religious rituals of a wicked people incite his wrath and his intense displeasure, serving as memorials of the cruel and perverse conduct of the people who are offering them. What Judah regarded as its holy service, the Lord regarded as the trampling of his courts by an occupying force, a wearying burden and an abomination. Under such conditions, instead of relieving the divine displeasure at their sin, Judah's religious ceremonies and rituals markedly intensified it.

Were it not for the dam of the Lord's merciful forbearance, the divine wrath that they incessantly incited would long since have wiped the land clean of their memory. The prophets often challenged the idea that sacrificial worship granted people some sort of immunity from the judgment of the Lord. Ritual cannot be abstracted from the broader behaviour of those who perform it, nor offering from the conduct and the hearts of the offerer.

Ritual is not hermetically sealed from or exculpatory for the rest of life, as if one could shield the vicious conduct of an oppressive and impotent people from the eyes and judgment of the Lord. The entire fabric of Judah's society is rotten, riddled through with the vilest oppression and injustice. Peter Lightheart suggests the possibility that the head in which there is no soundness might be King Uzziah himself, who had been struck as a result of his trespassing upon the house of the Lord.

He sought to act in the capacity of a priest, and he was struck with leprosy by the Lord as a result. The Lord is the one who hears the cries of the widow and the fatherless, but exhibiting the cruelty and the inhospitality that characterized the degenerate Sodomites before them, Judah's corrupt leaders exploit the poor and pervert justice for the perpetuation of their decadent ease. Rather than exposing the true character of the injustice and the corruption within the nation, Israel's worship itself had been rendered subservient to this perverse system, a means of dissembling corruption and oppression

and dulling the conscience of Judah to its enormities.

Along with his condemnation, Uzziah's message offers Judah hope. If they will only repent of their evil deeds, cleanse their ways, pursue justice and plead the cause of the needy, the Lord will heed their voices when they cry to him for aid, and they will be spared catastrophic judgment. If they fail to do so, however, the God who heeds the cries of the poor will devour them with the sword.

The temptation to put faith in religiosity, to employ religious ceremonies and rituals as akin to compensatory moral offsets for our godless, oppressive and unjust behavior, is a perennial one. Treated in such a manner, what we suppose to be our worship of God can actually be an integral element of our oppressive and perverse societies, as if it were a valve designed to release the discomforting pressure of uneasy consciences. Uzziah mercilessly attacks hypocritical religiosity.

He strips evildoers of excuses with which they sear consciences and shields with which they disguise their wickedness. Far from serving to minimize their exposure to judgment, the religiosity of an unjust, oppressive and perverse people places it in the very greatest apparel. Lightly invoking the name and blessing of God upon a nation is the most dangerous sort of folly when a society is filled with injustice, cruelty and wickedness.

True worship, by contrast, involves a searching indictment of all injustice. It corrects it and is a model for righteous behavior. When Judah presented itself before the Lord in its worship, they were inviting his inspection of the entirety of their lives, and recognizing that fact, they needed to comport themselves accordingly in all that they did.

The hollow practice of civil religion and cultural religiosity would be exposed and would ultimately betray all of those who had put their hope in them. Alas Judah would come to God for cleansing, repenting of their sins, learning to do good, and seeking justice, correcting oppression. Their presence before him would not be met with the Lord's pleasure.

The richer ceremonies would merely incite his wrath. To those who come in humility and repentance, however, the Lord promised that even the most egregious sins would be cleansed, their defilement would be purged, and they would be rendered guiltless before the Lord. Through Isaiah, the Lord gives his people an ultimatum.

But this is not like a typical ultimatum. An ultimatum is a final offering of terms before a complete breakdown of relations. At such a point, one might expect that the Lord would give his people a choice between complete destruction and just hanging in there.

In an ultimatum, one doesn't expect to be offered such favourable terms. But this is exactly what God gives to his people, not just the possibility of not being destroyed, but a promise of the complete purging of their sins if they will respond. They must choose

one of two paths.

Will they respond and receive the Lord's blessing, or will they fail to respond and be condemned when the Lord comes to purge his people? A question to consider. Looking at the end of the book of Isaiah, can you see any parallel elements to those that we see at the beginning? The unity of Isaiah chapter 2 is not clearly apparent to many commentators. It begins with a very positive vision of the future glorification of Zion, but follows that with a series of escalating prophecies concerning its corruption.

Some commentators, like John Oswald, observe the recurrence of the expression, the day of the Lord, or that day within it, as a sort of unifying thread throughout the material. While the material of this chapter might be composed of a number of different prophecies that have been joined together, it is by no means without thematic unity. We can see such unity, for instance, in the themes of being lifted up or being brought low.

An interesting feature of the first few verses of this chapter is the fact that we find them also in Micah chapter 4 verses 1 to 5. This obviously provokes questions about the relationship between the two prophets, who prophesied around the same time, and this piece of shared material. The material is near identical. The chief divergences are the absence of Micah chapter 4 verse 4 and the truncated form of the material of verse 5 in Isaiah's version.

Elsewhere in scripture we see similarities between prophetic books, one prophetic book citing another, or even common sources. But such extensive common material is a unique occurrence in the prophetic literature. There are various ways that we might understand the presence of the prophecy within two different books.

We could argue that they were both independently inspired to make a largely identical prophecy. This is definitely possible, although it's not a popular, or perhaps the most plausible, position. Other more popular approaches include the positions that it is later material that has been inserted into the text of one or both of the prophets, that one of the two was quoting a prophecy of the other, or had part of the other inserted into their text, or that both were using earlier material.

There are various considerations that will inform our judgment on the question. Some commentators adduce the greater prominence of Zion within the theology of Isaiah as evidence that the prophecy most likely originates with him. On the other hand, the omission of verse 4 of Micah's version in Isaiah's version might suggest that Micah's is the original, or alternatively, more fully quotes the original source.

Then there are stylistic features. For instance, while Micah chapter 4 verse 4 is only found in Micah's version, the expression, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken, is Isaianic in its style. It's found in Isaiah chapter 1 verse 20, chapter 40 verse 5, and chapter 58 verse 14, but isn't really found elsewhere.

Isaiah's account begins with the word that Isaiah the son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem, which adds weight to the argument for the originality of the prophecy with Isaiah. However, one could take the introductory formula in Isaiah as referring to something that Isaiah read in Micah or elsewhere. Just as we see Daniel reflecting upon the prophecy of Jeremiah's 70 years in Daniel chapter 9, so Isaiah might be reflecting upon the meaning of Micah's prophecy.

There are, of course, various examples of cross-fertilization among the prophets elsewhere, and as Micah and Isaiah were contemporaries who almost certainly knew each other in person, we should probably be aware of thinking of their ministries as hermetically sealed off from each other. The two prophets used the same material in different ways in their respective books. In Micah, for instance, the material opens a new section in the book.

Some have suggested that there is a tension between the vision of the two prophets, based on the question of whether the nations would still worship false gods in the latter days or not, a question that is raised by Micah chapter 4 verse 5 and pressed by such as Marvin Sweeney. Such textual questions are challenging, not least when we bring Qumran scrolls with different forms of the text of Isaiah into the picture. We should also consider the various hands that were involved in the reception, recording, compilation, transmission, and ordering of Micah and Isaiah's prophecies during their lives and afterwards.

It is not unlikely that the same group were involved in shaping both, and at points like this perhaps we are seeing tantalizing indications of various unknown fingerprints upon the text, or indications of richer interactions between the authors and editors of these two prophetic books. Perhaps Micah and Isaiah, both the men and the books, were informative interaction from the time of their initial oral ministries to the final form of their respective texts. We should also beware of depending too much upon the question of origins and sources, and failing to pay most attention to the literary form in which they come down to us in the final completed canon.

It is in that final form that they have authority in the life of the church. The chapter begins with a new superscription, the word that Isaiah the son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem. Positions differ among commentators about what material this serves as the superscription for.

Is it just the next few verses, or does it take us into later chapters? There is a remarkable shift here from the vision of Jerusalem and its sins in chapter 1. There is a sense in these opening verses of the city and the people's destiny. Within this passage we also hear some of the words of likely earlier traditions, such as the Songs of Zion in the Psalms, within which Mount Zion came to assume great significance. Psalms 46, 48 and 76 are referenced by some commentators in this context.

Psalm 46 verses 4 to 10 for instance. Come, behold the works of the Lord, how he has brought desolations on the earth. He makes wars cease to the end of the earth.

He breaks the bow and shatters the spear. He burns the chariots with fire. Be still, and know that I am God.

I will be exalted among the nations. I will be exalted in the earth. Mount Zion is actually a very modest elevation.

It's not even in one of the top 100 tallest mountain peaks in Israel. It is only about 2,500 feet tall. But as the site of the temple, it is the mountain of the Lord.

And according to this prophecy, it will function as the cosmic mountain, the mountain to which the whole world will gather, and the mountain that joins heaven to earth. We see Zion set over against the other mountains in places like Psalm 68 verses 14 to 18 too. When the Almighty scatters kings there, let snow fall on Zalmon.

O mountain of God, mountain of Bashan, O many-peaked mountain, mountain of Bashan, why do you look with hatred, O many-peaked mountain, at the mount that God desired for his abode, yes, where the Lord will dwell forever? The chariots of God are twice ten thousand, thousands upon thousands. The Lord is among them. Sinai is now in the sanctuary.

You ascended on high, leading a host of captives in your train, and receiving gifts among men, even among the rebellious, that the Lord God may dwell there. Mount Zion becomes like Eden. It is the beating heart of the world, the place from which all life flows and to which it all comes.

Elsewhere, water flows out of the temple on Zion, in places like Ezekiel chapter 47 and Joel 3. But here there is a stream of nations flowing up to Zion in pilgrimage, an image that we also see at the end of Zechariah chapter 14, which brings the two images together, living waters flowing out from Jerusalem and the nations flowing up to her. This would be a fulfillment of the Lord's purpose for his people, as a means of bringing his blessing to the nations. The nations come to Zion to learn the law and the ways of the Lord.

And the law and the word of the Lord also come out from Jerusalem, as their principles start to inform life elsewhere and as the rule of God extends over the peoples. The Lord's justice would be known on the earth, as he would judge between peoples and nations, settling disputes and establishing his judgment and rule. The outcome of the rule of the Lord among the nations would be peace, illustrated by the refashioning of weapons of war into tools of cultivation and the freedom to abandon the practice and the learning of conflict.

Joel chapter 3 verse 10 presents a reverse image of this. There is another sharp shift in

the tone of the text in verse 6, however it does follow from what proceeds with the summons to walk in the light of the Lord. King Uzziah had fought successfully against the Philistines, as we see in 2 Chronicles chapter 26 verse 6. He went out and made war against the Philistines and broke through the wall of Gath and the wall of Jabneh and the wall of Ashdod and he built cities in the territory of Ashdod and elsewhere among the Philistines.

Under the reign of Uzziah, Israel had prospered and had known military success against its neighbors. However, it seems that they had taken on some of the character of these surrounding nations. Rather than the nations going up to Jerusalem to learn the ways of the Lord, as we see in the vision of the opening verses, the Lord's people had been going out to the nations to learn their proud ways.

By this point, the pride and the haughtiness of the nations is greatly in evidence among the people of the Lord. They have riches and weaponry and idols, all symbols of their pride. They have assumed all sorts of idolatry and pagan practices.

If the expression at the end of verse 6 is properly understood as the striking of hands in the treaty, then it would seem that this situation is in part a result of their making treaties with other peoples. The Lord had warned the kings against multiplying wives, multiplying gold, and also building a great war machine with horses and chariots. With the people's prosperity, felt wealth, the power of their war machine, and also their alliances with other peoples, they seem to have developed a spiritual complacency and pride that the Lord would bring low.

Uzziah makes a startling statement at the end of verse 9. He does not want the Lord to leave his people's sin and pride unpunished, just to wink at his people's hubris and self-importance. This proud people, unless they humbled themselves quickly, would find themselves brought low by the Lord. He would humble their pride.

He alone would be exalted in the earth, and any who would exalt themselves before him would be torn down. The Day of the Lord was often seen as a time of vindication and deliverance and salvation for the people, but within the prophets we see that it has a negative aspect as well. It's the time when the Lord will come near to judge his people, and many will not be prepared.

In verses 12-17, it is described as a time when the lofty pride of men would be locked down. The imagery at the beginning here of the chopping down of a forest is something that we find elsewhere in the Book of Uzziah. Forests could represent the might of a people.

It could also represent things like the temple. Here the lofty cedars and the oaks of Bashan are probably the priests and rulers of the people and the nobility. If the mount of the glorious coming Jerusalem is going to be lifted up above the other mountains, here

we see the inverse of that image, as everything else that would exalt itself before the Lord is brought down.

The juxtaposition of these two images, the raising up of the mountain of Zion and the house of the Lord, and the bringing down of all these other powers and lofty things on the earth, encourages us to understand these things in relationship to each other. On the one hand, the going up to the mountain of the Lord and the lifting up of that mountain is a symbol of the humbling of man's pride, and on the other hand, the lofty cedars, oaks of Bashan, lofty mountains and hills, and all the high towers, are symbols of the idolatry of man's pride that stands directly against the true worship and knowledge of the Lord. In the coming day of the Lord, the idols and those who worship them will be utterly humiliated.

As the Lord rises up, people will shrink away and descend down into the earth, in caves of the rocks and holes of the ground. Once again, the imagery of lifting or rising up and sinking or being brought down is extremely important in the context. In the light of this image of the rising up of the Lord's glory and the shrinking down of man's pride, the chapter ends with a stern warning.

Stop regarding man in whose nostrils is breath, for of what account is he? For all of man's pride, for all of his puffing up of his importance, man is very small, but a creature whose breath will soon pass from his lips. Rather than being in the thrall of the pride of men, like the other nations, Judah and Jerusalem should learn from the initial prophecy, in which the nations speak among themselves, Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob. Isaiah presents the people with a similar summons, O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the Lord.

As Judah and Jerusalem look, not to the surrounding nations, but to the Lord in their midst, they will be raised up, as the prophecy promises. A question to consider, what are some of the more particular temptations associated with the different forms of pride that Isaiah identifies among the people? Why might such forms of pride have such a strong grip upon the hearts of sinful men? In Isaiah chapter 2, the prophet described the haughty pride of the people of Jerusalem and Judah, that would be humbled by the Lord on the coming day of his judgment. The Lord would bring all of man's lofty might down low, but he would raise up the mountain of Zion and of his house over all of the other mountains.

Rather than Zion going out to the nations and taking on their ways, the nations would flow up to Jerusalem, and the word and law of the Lord would flow out to the whole world. Chapter 3 continues the theme of the crushing of Jerusalem's pride. It takes the more general statements of the preceding chapter and expresses their import in more particular terms.

The conclusion of chapter 2, with its caution against depending upon the frailty of man,

sounds a note that is fundamental for much of what follows. Verses 1-7 fill out the picture of the cutting down of the lofty in verses 12-17 of the preceding chapter. Support and supply would be removed from Jerusalem and Judah.

The expression support and supply is one with two very similar words in the Hebrew, which various English translations try to convey with similar sounding words like support and supply. Judah and Jerusalem would be stripped even of the enjoyment of basic provisions like bread and water. These verses, however, focus more upon the people that would be removed from them.

They would lose the men with military might, they would lose the rulers, and they would lose the prophets, diviners, counsellors, and others that would give guidance and direction to the people. They would be left without skill, expertise, without might to perform things. The nation would be effectively decapitated, stripped of their prominent figures, and people who could have formed an effective hierarchy.

This is the sort of situation that Judah and Israel suffered when they were defeated by foreign nations. Their rulers and their authorities, their mighty men, and also their artisans, craftsmen, and skilled workers were all stripped from them, leaving them utterly subject to their new rulers, dependent upon them, and unable to mount any serious resistance. The vacuum that was left by such figures would be filled by much meaner sorts, by rulers who were weak, incompetent, unwise, and immature.

Boys and infants lack both might and wisdom, and as a result their rule could be officious and domineering. We should think of a bossy child that throws around weight that he does not have. Since such a leader has not yet attained to self-mastery, he cannot easily lead his people by example.

Since he lacks might, people will not submit to his strength. Since he lacks wisdom and maturity, people will not submit to his insight. Since he lacks deeply proven character, people will not submit to his goodness.

A people led by such rulers will be stunted by their petty weakness. Where rulers cannot lead by genuine virtues, by self-mastery, by might, by wisdom, and by good character, they will often, in their insecurity and weakness, be thrown back upon vicious forms of rule. Rule by such figures is often violent, arbitrary, and oppressive.

In a good society we are ruled by our betters, by people that exhibit virtues to which we can aspire. However, Judah and Jerusalem would be humbled by being ruled over and oppressed by people who were without any virtues that would commend them to exercise such preeminence. Weakness and insecurity and meanness of character would produce tyranny, and the tyranny would spread out among the people.

Each would oppress his own neighbor. And as the weak, vicious, and unworthy exercised



authority at the heart of the nation, authority more generally would be held in poor esteem. The honorable and virtuous among the people would be dishonored.

A healthy relationship between generations would also break down. The youth would despise the aged. Traditions would be rejected and overthrown, and there would be a breach in the continuing life of the nation.

Authority as such would break down, and order and proper hierarchy in society with it. Yet people still have a hunger for authority and for leaders, and in the rubble that remained of Judah and Jerusalem's society, people would seek for people to rule over them. The Prophet presents a situation where even the mere supposed possession of a fine garment would set someone apart as a potential ruler.

And yet the supposed possessor of this garment does not in fact own one. His house is as empty as everyone else's, and he cannot even rule over the ruins. The desperate situation described in verses 1-7 will come upon the people as a consequence of their current sinful pride and their prideful sin.

Pride comes naturally before a fall, and there is about to come a day of reckoning, a day when people will taste of the harvest of their speech and deeds, which are both addressed here in this context. There is a contrast between the fates of the righteous and that of the wicked. Even as others are judged, it will be well with the righteous.

The organic connection between deeds and consequences is important here. It is not as if the Lord is just bringing a punishment upon people that has no relationship to their actions. Through their sinful actions, they sowed what would later yield the bitter fruit of their judgment.

Perhaps the reference to their proclaiming their sin like Sodom in verse 9 looks back to chapter 1 and the comparison of the people with Sodom and Gomorrah. Verses 12-15 focus upon the failures and the sins of the leaders and announce the Lord's entering into judgment with them as a sort of divine lawsuit that is being carried out against them, focused upon their oppression of the poor of his people. The unworthy rulers of the people are once again described here.

Infants are their oppressors, and women rule over them. The word translated women here might be better translated as creditors. As Hugh Williamson argues, this is the reading more commonly adopted by commentators today.

If women were in view, it would presumably be focusing upon their weakness in some way. Or perhaps there is also a half glance back to the figure of Athaliah, who was the great usurper, the one female ruler of the people, and the one under whom Judah experienced some of its darkest days. More likely though, looking at the context, the reference is to creditors, usurers that have a predatory relationship with the people.

This might be what is in view in the crushing of the people and the grinding of the face of the poor that is described in verse 15. The judgment is not merely upon kings, but more generally upon the ruling class, the elders and the princes of the people. And there is a special attention given to their economic oppression.

The Lord's special concern for the poor and vulnerable among his people is a theme that can be traced throughout the entirety of the scriptures. Verses 16 and following singles out the daughters of Zion and declares a judgment against them. Elsewhere in scripture we have judgments that focus upon the rich women of the people.

For instance, in Amos chapter 4 verses 1 to 2, Hear this, you cows of Bashan, who are on the mountain of Samaria, who oppress the poor, who crush the needy, who say to your husbands, Bring that we may drink. The Lord God has sworn by his holiness that, Behold, the days are coming upon you, when they shall take you away with hooks, even the last of you with fish hooks. There the women are presented as being indifferent to, complicit with, and also as instigating the sort of oppression that their husbands are carrying out for them.

Their decadent hunger for feast and finery is behind the crushing of the poor. In these verses here in Isaiah, the fashionable clothes and accessories of these rich women are enumerated. Their haughty and vain way of going about is described.

If 8th century Jerusalem and Judah had had gossip mags, these are the women that would have filled their pages. It is important to recognize that these women are not just individuals who come under the Lord's judgment. They stand for the wider people.

These are the women that would have held the attention of the rich and powerful of the people, and also of the poor, the actresses, the models, the celebrities, and the socialites of their day. In humbling them, the Lord would be humbling the entirety of Jerusalem's high society. Verse 24 speaks of five different ways in which their future state would contrast with their present.

The stench of rotteness would replace the scent of perfume. Fashionable belts would be replaced by a slaver's rope. Women with the fanciest hairstyles would have their hair shaved off like prisoners of war.

Rich robes would be replaced by the clothes of mourning. The most arresting beauties would be branded like cattle. The daughters of Zion stand for the people more generally.

They are the daughters that bear the image of their unfaithful mother, who is in view in verses 25-26. They symbolize and embody the false glory of the people. They symbolize and embody the character of the people among whom they enjoy such prominence.

They face a bitter fate, and their mother, Zion herself, would be left bereft. Her sons would fall by the sword, and she would be abandoned in bitter mourning. A question to

consider.

How might reflecting upon the description of vicious rule within this chapter help us to understand better the character of good rule? The opening verse of Isaiah chapter 4 should probably be taken with the section at the end of chapter 3. There the prophet described the humiliation of the daughters of Zion, the haughty, wealthy and fashionable women of the city, who epitomized its pride and its indifference to poverty and oppression. This continues the theme of the humbling of Judah's pride that has been running since chapter 2. After the Lord had cut down the lofty of the land, stripping the people of their rulers, judges, counselors, prophets and artisans, men would search in vain for some figure to act as their leader. Isaiah chapter 3 verses 6-7 For a man will take hold of his brother in the house of his father, saying, You have a cloak.

You shall be our leader, and this heap of ruins shall be under your rule. In that day he will speak out, saying, I will not be a healer. In my house there is neither bread nor cloak.

You shall not make me leader of the people. Chapter 4 verse 1 describes a similar situation for the humbled women of the land, who would engage in a comparably desperate quest for a husband or a man to take ownership of them. Widowed and impoverished, as Zion herself at the end of chapter 3, women who were formerly of high status would reduce themselves to extreme concubinage or near prostitution, simply to be under a man's protection and to be spared the social dishonor of destitute and childless widowhood.

In the most sanguinary wars, the male population of a country can be radically diminished. After the Paraguayan War of the 1860s, for instance, there was likely only about one man for every four women in the country, and considerably less in many regions. Recording horrific events that occurred under a decade after Isaiah's prophecy here, 2 Chronicles chapter 28 describes a situation in which 120,000 men of Judah were slain by their Israelite brethren during the Syro-Ephraimite War during the reign of King Ahaz.

One could imagine that with so many young men dead on the battlefield, and so much property destroyed, plundered or captured, in a society where security depended heavily upon male protection and provision, any man of might and means that remained would have destitute women desperately trying to outbid each other for his support. Isaiah describes women going to the extent of foregoing provision and surrendering themselves to such a man's ownership merely for the security and the minimal social status of belonging to his household. Chapters 2-4 of Isaiah largely present the awful humbling of the pride of Judah and Jerusalem.

However, this material is bookended by two prophecies that markedly contrast with the main body of the material that they frame. Chapter 2 verses 1-4 describes the raising up of the mountain of the Lord over all of the other mountains, and the flowing of the

nations up to it in worship, and the flowing out of the law and the word of the Lord to the ends of the earth. Chapter 4 verses 2-6 present a restored and purged Jerusalem in terms of Exodus imagery.

In the process it offers us an understanding of how the glorious vision of Jerusalem with which the section began would be achieved. It would be achieved as the people are purified through judgment. There have been several uses of the expression in that day in the last few chapters.

In chapter 2 verse 11, verse 17 and 20, chapter 3 verse 4 and 18, and in chapter 4 verse 1. At certain points in these previous uses it was apparent that the day would not merely be one of humbling of the pride and judgment of the wicked, but also of exaltation of the Lord and abandonment of idolatry. Here that aspect of the awaited day becomes more prominent. There are also allusions back to other elements of preceding prophecies, such as to the daughters of Jerusalem in verse 4. The expression the branch of the Lord might make us think of the various references in later prophecies in scripture to a messianic figure referred to as the branch.

We encountered this figure in places like Jeremiah chapter 23 verse 5 and chapter 33 verse 15, also in Zechariah chapter 3 verse 8 and 6 verse 12. Here however, it's not entirely clear that this figure is primarily in view. Rather, most commentators argue that it ought to be read in parallel with the expression the fruit of the land later in the same verse.

Yet, considering the ways that Isaiah employs arboreal imagery elsewhere, it does not seem inappropriate to see some sort of indirect reference at the very least to the messianic branch in whom the people would flourish. Just a few chapters later, in chapter 11 verse 1 for instance, he will write There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his root shall bear fruit. Brevard Charles writes Once the term branch had become a technical term for the Messiah in later prophetic literature, it is difficult to imagine this earlier non-technical usage not accumulating a richer connotation than perhaps originally intended.

Particularly does this move seem likely when one recalls that the passage has been linked intertextually with its larger Isaianic context. Had not Isaiah chapter 11 verse 1 spoken of a shoot from the stump of Jesse which initiated the prophetic theme of the return of paradisaical peace and harmony? Moreover, the use of the verb create raises the level of the imagery to that of a new divine creation which starts over as it were after the cleansing of Jerusalem. In sum, in the present literary context within the book of Isaiah, the terms resonate with messianic reference both in terms of the messianic bringer of salvation, the branch, and the return of paradise, the fruit of the land.

Indeed, the very expansive, overlaid style of the unit is a further sign that this passage has acquired multilayered connotations when construed in the light of the larger corpus

of scripture. Israel is the people of the Lord's planting, and after his pruning of her she will flourish, and the remnant of her will be seen in their true splendor. After the Lord judged the wicked and the evil doers among his people, those who survived the purging of Jerusalem as its remnant would manifest a new holiness.

Elsewhere in scripture we read of the Lord's book of life, and verse 3 seems to refer to such a document in speaking of those who were accorded for life in Jerusalem. This group would be revealed through the purgation of the Lord as through judgment and burning he revealed the faithful among the people. Along with the imagery that we have already seen of paradise, in verses 5 and 6 imagery is taken from the Exodus to refer to the intimate presence of the Lord among his people, protecting them, providing for them, and rendering them holy. The most powerful historical instance of this, of course, was the Lord's dwelling among his people and leading them by the pillar of cloud and fire in the wilderness.

That pillar of cloud and fire had become associated with the tabernacle, then later the temple, filled with the glory of the Lord, but now the glorious presence of the Lord among his people is no longer seen to be contained within the single building and the single room within the building of the Holy of Holies in the temple. Rather it has expanded to overshadow the entire city of Zion. The Lord is dwelling among his people as the great bridegroom with his bride.

The canopy and the booth for shade are perhaps the imagery of a bridal chamber. This intimacy of the Lord's relationship with his people, taking imagery of paradise and also of Exodus, is a concrete image of the fulfilment of the covenant formula, I will be their God and they will be my people. A question to consider, how might we see in these final verses of chapter 4 connections with the feast of tabernacles? What insights might follow from those connections? Isaiah chapter 5 seems to mark the start of a new section of the book, opening with the song of the vineyard.

Several commentators, Christopher Seitz being one example, argue that the material of chapter 5 originally formed a single block with material from chapter 9 verse 8 to 10 verse 34. Chapter 6 verse 1 to 9 verse 6 has, they argue, been inserted within it. This claim is based, among other things, upon the presence of the key phrase For all this his anger has not turned away, and his hand is stretched out still, which is in verse 25 of this chapter, but also a refrain repeated in the supposed other half of the divided unit that now brackets the inserted section in chapter 9 verse 12, 17 and 21, and then in chapter 10 verse 4. This theory recognises the presence of woe oracles in both of the supposedly divided sections.

As Brevard-Charles rightly notes, however, this theory suffers from such heavy theoretical ballast as to obscure rather than illuminate the biblical text. The vineyard imagery that we find in the opening verses of chapter 5 is also found elsewhere in

scripture. Psalm 80 verses 8 to 16 is perhaps one of the most prominent examples.

There is a return to the imagery of the vineyard later in Isaiah in chapter 20. In that day, a pleasant vineyard, sing of it. Jesus, of course, famously uses and reworks imagery of the vineyard in his parable of the wicked vinedressers.

Imagery used from vineyards is also elsewhere associated with love poetry. The song or parable of the first seven verses draws back from the immediacy of Jerusalem's sin and the judgement that awaits it in Isaiah's day, offering a parable that helps the hearer to grasp the larger reality of Israel's dire condition. As elsewhere in scripture, a parable can provide an arresting new way of framing and perceiving a situation.

Verses 1 to 2 paint the picture. Verses 3 to 4 invite the inhabitants of Jerusalem and Judah to cast judgement. Verses 5 to 6 declare the sentence.

And verse 7 renders the meaning of the imagery more explicit. Isaiah introduces this passage as a love song, sung for the sake of his friend or beloved, concerning his friend's vineyard. Yet any romantic expectations on the hearer's part are soon dashed as the love story the prophet sings swiftly turns sour.

In the text, three sets of imagery are artfully fused. There's the romantic imagery, the arboreal imagery and legal imagery, all interplaying with each other. The vine is also in some sense a bride and the defendant in a lawsuit and the planter is also a bridegroom and the wronged party.

The prophet is both the singing friend of the bridegroom and a prosecutor of his friend's case against an unfaithful spouse with the inhabitants of Jerusalem and Judah serving as the jury in verse 3. As in Nathan's story of the ewe lamb delivered to David in 2 Samuel chapter 12, the party being judged is presented with a parable calling them to pronounce judgement upon themselves. You are the vine. The imagery of the song is artfully chosen.

The imagery of vineyards and gardens on hills are associated with love poetry in places like the Song of Songs, chapter 1 verse 14, chapter 2 verse 15 or 8 verses 10 to 12. It also however recalls Eden, Noah's vineyard, and also are related to the temple. He built a watchtower in the midst of it.

The blessed and good wife is elsewhere compared to a fruitful vine in the centre of the garden of her marriage bearing good fruit in places like Psalm 128 verse 3. The chosen vine was to provide the owner with the necessary grapes by which to make high quality wine. Yet when the fruit was gathered, the fruit was that of wild uncultivated grapes, perhaps subtly hinting at marital infidelity. The Lord challenges the inhabitants of Jerusalem and Judah.

What more was there to do for my vineyard that I have not done in it? The sentence

upon the vineyard swiftly follows. Its hedge and wall of protection will be destroyed, allowing wild beasts to ravage it, and it shall be rendered a wasteland bearing thorns and thistles, parched for lack of rain. In the destruction of the vineyard, the painful themes of the fall in Eden are recalled.

Thorns and thistles will grow where once a well-watered and beautiful garden lay. If the heroes of Isaiah's parable were in any doubt, his point is made very explicit in the conclusion. For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah are his pleasant planting.

The indictment is summed up with a death poetic twist. He looked for justice, but behold bloodshed, for righteousness, but behold an outcry. The Lord desired a society of right and just relations.

Such justice would be displayed not merely in the deliverance of righteous judgments by the rulers and judges of the people, but also in the economic and social relations among the people more generally. The indictment involves a play upon words. The word bloodshed looks like the word for justice in the Hebrew, and the word outcry like the word righteousness.

It is as if the owner of the vineyard were inspecting its fruit, and although from a distance it looked like the cultivated grapes of righteousness and justice were being born in the vineyard, as he came closer it became apparent that they were quite the opposite. Only the wild grapes of outcry and bloodshed were to be found. The parable of the vineyard is followed by a litany of woes, addressed to the wild grapes that the nation is producing, identifying various forms of their sin in succession.

Verses 8-10 speaks to greed and economic oppression. All of the people were supposed to enjoy the gift of the land. However, wealthy landowners had been accumulating land and driving the poor away from it.

They had been reducing the poor to destitution or to landless and economically vulnerable labor. The Lord would judge such oppressors with the covenant sentence of futility. Their great properties and vast estates would be rendered desolate, and their land would be unfruitful.

The failure of the vineyards of the oppressors to yield to their masters is, of course, a fitting judgment for a people that had only just been likened to a vineyard producing only wild grapes for the one who had planted it. Verses 11-12 address the drunkenness, debauchery and decadence of a people who ran after wine and devoted themselves to feasting, yet neglected the Lord. They give the entirety of their days to revelry, from when they rise up in the morning to when they lie down in the evening.

They are also usurping the place that meditation upon the Lord ought to have in their

lives. Their preoccupation is solely feasting and decadence. The sentence to be cast upon them is once again fitting to their sin.

They would be expelled from the land that they had sought to accumulate to themselves, and from which they had excluded others. Those given to obsessive feasting will go hungry and thirsty. Indeed, they would be the victims of the enlarged appetite of the grave, which would devour them at its coming great banquet.

Just as chapters 2 and 3 had explored the contrast between the Lord and His mountain being exalted, and man in his pride being humbled and brought low, so the Lord's holiness would be demonstrated, while the greed and the proud wicked would be abased. The land of the rich would become wilderness and waste, grazing land for flocks, and their ruins places where wandering nomads might set up temporary camp. In verses 18-19, it is the brazen practical atheism of the people that comes into view and is condemned.

They have committed themselves to the practice of wickedness, as if they were devoting the entirety of their efforts and energies to it, as if they were straining their backs, dragging it along as if with cart ropes. They cynically mock at the justice of the Lord, believing that there is no evidence that the Lord will act in their situation. Along with the practical atheism of the wicked is the perversion described in verses 20-23.

They care little about truth and readily pervert justice for bribes, denying people righteous judgment in their cases. They celebrate what is evil while condemning what is good. Many of those being judged are presumably among those who are supposed to teach the people, and yet they are compounding their darkness.

The sentence upon this wicked people, upon the perverse vineyard, is pronounced in verses 24-25. They would be reduced to stubble, dry grass, and rotten wood that would be good for nothing but fuel for the fire. All of this is on account of their rejection of the word and law of the Lord.

From these metaphors we move to more literal images. As the Lord came upon his people in judgment, his advent being described in theophanic language, their corpses would be scattered like refuse in the midst of the streets. One of the great lessons that the people needed to learn was that the Lord was over all of the nations, the nations that terrified them, with whom they were compromising in their foreign policy out of fear.

All operate at the command and behest of the Lord. Verses 26-30 present the Lord summoning nations against his people. The nations are powerful, arrayed for battle, and yet it is the Lord alone who commands their actions.

These enemies, empowered by the Lord, are described as if they were relentless natural forces, their horses' hooves are compared to flint, the wheels like whirlwind, the sound



that they make to the roaring of lions, their actions to those of a predatory beast, and their coming like the inrush of a growling sea or dark storm clouds. Just as the Lord controls the elements and the meteorological forces of the world, so he controls the powers of the nations, and he will wield them against his unfaithful people. A question to consider, what aspects of a vineyard, its fruit, its working, its produce and its processes are used as parables and prophetic imagery here and elsewhere in scripture? In Isaiah chapter 6 we find something that many have identified as a prophetic call narrative related to accounts that we find in places like Jeremiah chapter 1 and Ezekiel chapters 1-3.

In Jeremiah chapter 1 verses 4-10 we read of Jeremiah's installation as a prophet for the nation of Judah. Now the word of the Lord came to me, saying, Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you, I appointed you a prophet to the nations. Then I said, Our Lord God, behold, I do not know how to speak, for I am only a youth, but the Lord said to me, Do not say, I am only a youth, for to all to whom I send you you shall go, and whatever I command you you shall speak.

Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, declares the Lord. Then the Lord put out his hand and touched my mouth, and the Lord said to me, Behold, I have put my words in your mouth. See, I have set you this day over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to break down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant.

In that chapter the Lord proceeds to assure Jeremiah of the effectiveness that the words that he has placed upon Jeremiah's lips will have. He declares the judgment that is about to come upon the nation of Judah from the north, the way that Jeremiah will be empowered for his mission, and how his message will be received and responded to. Verses 17-19 As in Isaiah, Jeremiah's mouth and lips are prepared for speech.

In Ezekiel's case, like Isaiah, he witnesses a theophanic vision, and he is given a scroll to eat. Moses also has a theophanic vision and a prophetic commission in Exodus chapters 3 and 4. However, while the passages describing Jeremiah and Ezekiel's prophetic cause open their respective books, Isaiah's is found six chapters in. And this puzzles many commentators, as chapters 6, verse 1 to 8 has many of the expected features of an inaugural commission.

The prophet's lips are prepared, and he is given an outline of his mission and the results that it would have. Commentators have, in many cases, sought an explanation for this in speculative reconstructions of the redaction history of the text, in the different historical layers of its composition. It is hypothesized by some, for instance, that the call narrative, along with chapters 7-8, was part of a single document, and so was kept with them, even though it might better have been situated at the beginning of the book.

John Oswald remarks upon the fact that many of those advancing this theory are the

same as those who argue that this supposedly inserted section has broken up material in the chapters that bracket it. Far better, Oswald suggests, to place far less emphasis upon doubtful reconstructions, and to focus instead upon the final canonical form of the text, and the call narrative in its actual situation. Another important consideration here is that, despite similarities with inaugural call narratives, there are also similarities with the vision of the divine counsel given by the prophet Micaiah in 1 Kings chapter 22, verses 19-22.

And Micaiah said, Therefore hear the word of the Lord. I saw the Lord sitting on his throne, and all the host of heaven standing beside him on his right hand and on his left. And the Lord said, Who will entice Ahab that he may go up and fall at Ramoth-Gilead? And one said one thing, and another said another.

Then a spirit came forward and stood before the Lord, saying, I will entice him. And the Lord said to him, By what means? And he said, I will go out, and will be a lying spirit in the mouth of all his prophets. And he said, You are to entice him, and you shall succeed.

Go out and do so. Rather than reading Isaiah chapter 6 as the account of Isaiah's initial call, it might be better understood as the account of a special commissioning, in which he receives a more extensive and prominent task, although he is already a prophet at the beginning of it. The vision is dated to the year of King Uzziah's death, and it is a glorious vision of the Lord, exalted and enthroned in his temple.

We ought to remember that the temple, literally the palace, and especially the Holy of Holies, was the symbolic throne room of the Lord. The Lord was enthroned upon the cherubim, with the Ark of the Covenant being like his footstool. The date of King Uzziah's death is uncertain, and determining it depends heavily upon larger schemes of chronology that we follow, some suggest 742 BC, others a date several years later.

There seems to be more than a narrow concern for dating present here though. The death of King Uzziah, after a 52 year largely prosperous and militarily successful reign, represented a key point of transition to a time of national insecurity and threat. As the old king dies, however, the Lord, the word here is not Yahweh, but Lord, Master or Sovereign, is seen exalted upon his throne.

Human kings will fall, but the throne of the Lord endures. Judah's sovereignty is about to collapse, but God's is unrivaled and over all. In the inaugural vision of Ezekiel, he also saw the Lord enthroned on the divine throne chariot.

Ezekiel's description of the Lord focused upon the lower and upper body of the enthroned figure, shrouded in glory and also in metaphor. In Exodus chapter 24, it is the pavement beneath the throne that is most in view. In Uzziah's vision, it is the train of the Lord's robe at the level of his feet that is especially focused upon.

Along with the enthroned Lord, Uzziah saw seraphim above him. The seraphim, literally the burning ones, are described as having six wings, two covering their faces, two covering their feet and two with which they flew. The feet here might possibly be a euphemistic reference to genitals.

Whatever it is, they shield themselves from the glory of the Lord and cover their modesty. They seem to have some human-like features, faces, hands and feet, but the more specific character of the seraphim is difficult to ascertain. We don't have them described anywhere else in scripture.

Elsewhere in scripture, the term is used in relation to the fiery serpents in Numbers chapter 21, and the bronze serpent that Moses erects in response to that plague. In contrast to those, however, we are not told that the burning ones here in Isaiah chapter 6 are serpents. However, in Isaiah chapter 14 verse 29, we encounter the same terminology.

They are clearly used in relation to a serpent. Rejoice not, O Philistia, all of you, that the rod that struck you is broken, for from the serpent's root will come forth an adder, and its fruit will be a flying fiery serpent. It is likely that we should imagine the seraphim here as flying serpentine figures, with some human limbs and features.

Several scholars relate them to Egyptian images of winged urii, serpent-like creatures associated with gods and pharaohs. As flying fiery serpents, they are also akin to living lightning bolts. The seraphim called Antiphoneli, declaring the holiness of the Lord, Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts, the whole earth is full of his glory.

The Lord is the thrice holy God, enthroned above all other powers, whose majesty pervades his creation. The seraphim pronounce the utter incomparability of the Lord, his set-apartness, and his consuming presence. And the temple in Isaiah's vision responds.

The foundations of the threshold shake, and the building fills with smoke. We should probably connect this to the cloud of the Lord's presence, described in places like Exodus chapter 40, but also to a glorious cloud of incense. As the building shakes, so does the prophet, Isaiah recognizing all too clearly his own sinfulness and his membership of a sinful people, exposed by the dazzling glory and holiness of the Lord's fiery presence, despairs, suddenly seeing who he is in relation to the holiness of the Lord, and thinking himself to be a dead man.

As Oswald underlines, it is not the greatness of the Lord's might, so much as the consuming holiness of his presence that impresses itself upon the prophet. As for his own sinful character, and the sinful character of the people among whom he ministered, Isaiah feels the primary locus of that uncleanness to be in their lips and their speech. We might perhaps relate this to the teaching of the book of Proverbs and elsewhere, where the tongue is the chief organ revealing the character of a person.

We might think about the false worship of Judah also, as described in chapter 1, as a particularly egregious example of their unclean lips. James speaks of unclean lips in his epistle, in chapter 3, verses 10-12. From the same mouth comes blessing and cursing.

My brothers, these things ought not to be so. Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and salt water? Can a fig tree, my brothers, bear olives? Will a grapevine produce figs? Neither can a salt pond yield fresh water. One of the burning ones, the seraphim, takes a burning coal from the altar and touches the lips of Isaiah with it, cleansing his mouth for service.

We should also recognise that this is a sort of igniting of his tongue. On the day of Pentecost, for instance, the ascended Christ sends his spirit upon his disciples in the form of tongues of fire alighting upon them. The tongues of fire become flaming tongues of speech by which they bear a spirit-empowered witness to Christ.

Something similar is happening here. The burning one is making Isaiah another sort of burning one, a prophet who can speak with fiery words. The fiery presence of the Lord that had earlier terrified Isaiah does not destroy but cleanses him, purging him of his guilt and atoning for his sin.

Having had his unclean lips cleansed, Isaiah is now prepared for service. The next thing that we hear is the Lord's voice, presumably addressing the assembly of the Divine Council. Whom shall I send, presumably refers to the Lord himself, and who will go for us to the Divine Council that surrounds him.

The seraphim and any of the other heavenly hosts who are present. As in 1 Kings 22, the prophet primarily seems to be a witness to these proceedings and is not directly summoned nor commanded. However, Isaiah speaks up, volunteering himself for the mission.

We should think here also of the mission of the prophet. A priest is someone who acts as a household servant for the Lord in his temple and also maintaining the household of his people. The king is the vice-gerent of the Lord, one who rules under him as his son.

The prophet, however, is a direct participant in the heavenly council. He participates in the deliberations of the Divine Council around the Lord in situations like this. He is one of the messengers of the Lord and the Divine Council to the people but also represents the people to the council.

Oswald helpfully articulates the progressive development of this scene. The sequential relationship of the elements ought not to be overlooked. Each element leads to the next.

The king's death prepares the way for the vision of God. The vision of God leads to self-despair. Self-despair opens the door to cleansing.

Cleansing makes it possible to recognize the possibility of service. The total experience then leads to an offering of oneself. The Lord's commission to Isaiah is a strange one.

The commission is to tell the people what the effect of his message will be. The people would be rendered insensible, much as Pharaoh's heart was hardened at the time of the Exodus. It is important, as John Goldengate notes, to recognize that Isaiah's commission was designed to be heard by Judah itself.

In 1 Kings chapter 22, Ahab was informed that there was a lying spirit in the mouth of his prophets, yet he heeded them nonetheless. It is not as if Judah is left without warning. Rather, the very warning message will compound and accelerate their judgment.

Paradoxically, the warning message will itself be a means by which that of which it warns will be effected. The people's senses would still physically function, but they would be robbed of spiritual perception in judgment for their sin. Sin gradually renders people unresponsive and insensible, hearts hardened, necks stiffened, ears dulled, and eyes darkened.

The response of the prophet is to ask a familiar question from the Psalms and elsewhere in Scripture. This is a common question in Lament. We see it in places like Psalm 13 verses 1-2.

How long, O Lord? Will you hide yourself forever? How long will your wrath burn like fire? The judgment, however, the Lord declares, would continue until the land was laid waste by it, desolated by the Lord's judgment. As we saw in the preceding chapters, it will only be through the purgation of judgment and the cutting off of all the sinful and wicked of the land that the people will finally experience the promise that we see at the beginning of chapter 2, for instance. This would involve both desolation, the city's laid waste without inhabitants, and also deportation, the Lord removing people far away.

We could perhaps connect this to three different waves of judgment. The wave of judgment in the Syro-Ephraimite war in the next few years, the wave of judgment in the attack of the Assyrians that would lead to the near destruction of Jerusalem in 701 BC, and then later in the destruction of Judah by Babylon in 586 BC. One might see the stump here as Jerusalem, which barely survived the attack of the Assyrians in 701 BC.

One could also imagine it applying to Judah after the return from exile in Babylon in the 530s BC. As Joseph Blenkinsop notes, Holy Seed only elsewhere is mentioned in Ezra 9, verse 2, in reference to the population of the returnees, some of whom had been intermarrying with surrounding pagan peoples. There is a hint of promise at the end.

After all of the judgment has fallen upon the people, they will not be destroyed, but purged. A small remnant will remain, but yet they will be a holy remnant. Through them there is the hope of the people finally flourishing.

A question to consider, how does the commission of Isaiah in this chapter provide a fundamental framework for understanding Jesus and the Church's mission in the New Testament? The years of the ministry of Isaiah were years of mortal threat for Judah. They faced both the alliance of the northern kingdom of Israel and Aram, and then the rising power of Assyria, which would all but wipe out the nation in 701 BC, the waters of the Assyrian invasion coming up to the neck of Jerusalem. In the teeth of such grave threats, the message of Isaiah was to hold steady, to trust in the Lord, rather than in human power.

Judah would be sorely tempted to place its trust in alliances with mighty nations that could come to their aid in their distress, especially Assyria and Egypt, the dominant powers in the north and the south, respectively. Terrified by such existential threats to the nation, the nerve of Judah could easily snap, and rather than trusting in the Lord, it could throw in its lot with other powers. Trust in false gods and trust in foreign nations and human might were two closely associated forms that idolatry could take.

Judah, in its dire distress, when it seems almost certain that it is about to be extinguished as a nation, is forced to face the question of the ones in whom it ultimately places its trust. It was easy during the peace and prosperity of the reign of King Uzziah to pay lip service to the Lord, when things seemed secure and the stakes were low. However, now Judah's continued existence rests upon the answer to such questions.

Spiritual compromises that seemed to be of no more than minor consequence a decade prior will now be revealed for what they always were, as the shallow veneer is stripped away by crisis and the heart of the people and their king is disclosed in the moment of decision. In Isaiah chapters 7-39, this theme of trust is prominent. The section is bookended by narratives in which Isaiah addresses two different kings of Judah in times of national crisis.

In chapter 7, Isaiah addresses King Ahaz during the crisis of the Syro-Ephraimite war and the invasion of the land by Reza in the king of Syria and Pekah the king of Israel. In chapters 36-39, Isaiah addresses King Hezekiah during the crisis of the Assyrian invasion. In both cases, acting in terms of the immediate threat, the kings are in danger of missing the darker storm clouds on their horizons, the greater powers that will later come up against them, Assyria in the case of King Ahaz and Babylon in the case of King Hezekiah.

The narrative of Isaiah's commission in the preceding chapter was dated to the year of King Uzziah's death. Although largely a righteous king, Uzziah had been struck by the Lord with leprosy as he sought to trespass upon the temple. He had lived out the final years of his life in separation from others, while his son Jotham had largely held the reins of power for him.

Jotham was a righteous king like his father, but his sole reign was probably only a

relatively short one. After he died, his idolatrous son Ahaz acceded to the throne. During the reign of Uzziah, the kingdom of Assyria had been weak, and as the Arameans were largely a spent force, having earlier been crushed by the power of Assyria, Israel and Judah thrived under two long reigning monarchs, Jeroboam II in the north and Uzziah in the south.

This situation radically changed with the accession of Tiglath-Pileser III to the throne of Assyria in 745 BC. Tiglath-Pileser pursued an expansionist policy and regained dominance over territories that had slipped out of Assyria's control in the preceding decades. Faced with a resurgent Assyria, the other countries in the region needed to determine how to relate to it.

Judah adopted a pro-Assyria foreign policy under Ahaz, while some other tributary nations of Assyria like Israel and Aram sought to break free of its clutches. Assyria had ravaged both Syria, or Aram, and the northern kingdom of Israel. Israel and Aram joined together to form an anti-Assyrian coalition, and wanting to bolster this and crush support for Assyria to their south, Aram or Syria and Israel joined forces to attack Judah.

In the Syro-Ephraimite war, which started in the mid-730s BC, the Arameans and Israelites invaded Judah, devastating Ahaz's kingdom. Their intent seemed to have been to replace Ahaz with a puppet king, the son of Tebiel, a name that can mean either God is good, or more ironically, good for nothing. Under this puppet king, Judah would join their anti-Assyrian alliance.

2 Chronicles chapter 28 describes the devastation that this war wrought upon Judah. Judah would lose 120,000 men in battle against Israel, and would have 20,000 more people taken captive in just a single day of this war. This was the threat that provides the context of Isaiah chapter 7. The idolatrous king Ahaz had received news of the alliance of Israel and Syria.

Hearing that they are coming up to attack Jerusalem, he and his people were naturally terrified. The events of this chapter were probably set in 736 or 735 BC. The Lord sends Isaiah to speak to Ahaz.

Ahaz is faced with a moment of decision. Is he going to trust in the Lord, or will he place his trust in the might of Assyria instead? Central to this and the following few chapters are a series of children who serve as signs to the people. John Oswald notes the importance of Shear Jashub and Emanuel in this chapter, Meher Shalal Hashbaz and Isaiah's children more generally in the following chapter, and the promised royal child in chapter 9 verses 6-7.

These children are symbols of weakness, vulnerability, and dependence, but also hope, the possibility of a new dawn through the pangs of suffering, God's promises coming to fruition in the timescale of their processes of maturation, and of the Lord's fatherly

provision and protection. Christopher Seitz observes further that the children are distributed evenly both over the text and over time. He writes, The first, Shear Jashub, is already born, the second, Emanuel, about to be born, and the third, Meher Shalal Hashbaz, not yet conceived.

We also see children in their names serving as prophetic signs in the ministry of the prophet Hosea. The Lord sends Isaiah out to meet King Ahaz with his son Shear Jashub. Shear Jashub's name means, a remnant will return.

It is quite possible that Shear Jashub's name was related to the message of the end of chapter 6, in the final verse of which we read, And though a tenth remain in it, it will be burned again, like a terebinth or an oak, whose stump remains when it is felled. The holy seed is its stump. The import of Isaiah's son's name here is mostly negative.

It foretells the fact that Judah will be almost extinguished, and only the smallest remnant would remain. However, it is not without its element of hope. As we have already seen in the preceding chapters, it would be through a purified remnant that the Lord would make his people glorious once more.

King Ahaz and Judah would suffer a devastating blow, but it would not prove to be a mortal one. We are also reminded here that it is the house of David that is threatened. The Davidic dynasty, to whom the Lord had made great covenant promises, seems to be on the brink of annihilation.

It isn't merely human rule that is under threat, but the promises of the Lord. Isaiah is sent to meet the king at the end of the conduit of the upper pool of the city. It is quite likely that, anticipating a siege, Ahaz is inspecting the water supply of the city.

While Hezekiah would later build a water tunnel, at this juncture in history, Jerusalem was an unusual city in that it did not have any reliable water supply within its walls. Of course, having large enough water supplies would be essential were the city to withstand a coming siege. One can imagine that, his mind preoccupied with the city's great strategic weakness, King Ahaz's mind would be particularly unsettled when Isaiah met with him.

A few decades later, in events recorded in Isaiah chapter 36, the Rabshakeh would confront Hezekiah, Ahaz's son, at the same location. The Lord's message to Ahaz is one of reassurance. The appearance of these two powerful kings approaching to take Jerusalem, with its limited capacity to withstand a siege, is doubtless terrifying.

However, notwithstanding this apparent threat, Ahaz should not be afraid. Israel and Aram are already doomed and spent forces, smouldering stumps of what they once were. If Ahaz will only trust in the Lord and hold his nerve, he and his people will survive their assault, without any need to sell the nation out to some foreign protector, which is



what they ended up doing.

Ahaz turned to Assyria, and also to its gods, and ended up bringing a greater rod upon Judah's back. The Lord reminds Ahaz that, for all of their supposed might, Syria and Israel are ultimately founded upon two mortal men, Rezan and Pekah. Judah, if it will only trust in the Lord, could be established upon the might and the wisdom of the Lord of hosts.

However, if Ahaz and his people will not trust in the Lord, they will not enjoy any security. Their only hope is trusting in Him, living by faith rather than by sight. The second half of verse 8 presents the interpreter with a difficult problem, as it speaks of the shattering of Ephraim, so that they are no longer a people within 65 years.

However, while technically true, Ephraim would be shattered in just over a decade's time. Some commentators have raised the possibility that 65 years looks beyond this to the fuller mopping up of the scattered remnants of the land of Israel, with the further deportations under later Assyrian rulers, described in places like Ezra 4, verses 2 and 10. In verses 10 to 17, the Lord addresses King Ahaz a second time, offering the king a sign.

Ahaz and his kingdom, facing such an existential threat, would naturally struggle to trust in the Lord against all of those appearances. The Lord recognises such human weakness and graciously offers a sign of Ahaz's choice to steal him, giving him some sight to strengthen him in the course of his faith. Ahaz, with a show of false piety, claims that he does not want to put the Lord to the test, turning down the Lord's offer.

However, the Lord's offer of a sign was to help Ahaz take some of the first faltering steps in a path of faith, to help a man of little faith, who wanted to believe, deal with lingering unbelief. Ahaz's false piety was not a reaction of faith, but one of unbelief, of a man who had no intention of taking the path of faith at all. The Lord grants his servants physical signs, concrete promissory assurances, to equip them in their struggle to live by faith, and declining these is not a sign of faith or of piety, but of their opposites.

We see an example of such a sign in the three signs that Saul was given in 1 Samuel chapter 10, assuring him that the Lord had set him apart for kingship. Even though Ahaz rejected the Lord's offer of a sign, the Lord would give him a sign nonetheless. The sign of verses 14 to 17 has been the occasion of intense discussion among commentators, especially on account of its use in Matthew chapter 1 verses 20 to 23.

But as he considered these things, behold an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins. All this took place to fulfil what the Lord had spoken by the prophet, behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel, which means God with us.

In Matthew's use of Isaiah chapter 7 verse 14, the prophecy is directly related to the fulfilment of Jesus' birth of a virgin. However, it is not clear that the key term translated as virgin in the Septuagint and in most English Bibles, and related to the virgin birth in the New Testament, ought to be taken in such a narrow sense in Isaiah chapter 7. Brevia Childs, discussing some of the challenges of translating the term, observes that it seems to refer primarily to young women who had reached puberty. Translating the term as young woman, on the one hand, would give the misleading impression that it would typically include young married women.

On the other hand, translating it as virgin would be, as Childs writes, misleading in too narrowly focusing on virginity rather than on sexual maturity. Besides the meaning of the term translated as virgin in most of our Bibles, we need to consider what the reference to THE virgin means. Is it a more generic reference to a class of women who have only recently reached sexual maturity, or a more specific reference to a known woman? It seems more likely that it is the latter, which raises the further question of the identity of the woman in question.

Considering that the two other children that serve as prophetic signs in these chapters are the children of Isaiah himself, many commentators think that Emmanuel is likely also the son of Isaiah. Isaiah writes in chapter 8 verse 18, Behold, I and the children whom the Lord has given me are signs and portents in Israel from the Lord of hosts, who dwells on Mount Zion. May her shall I hashbaz is, in chapter 8 verse 3, described as the result of the prophetess conceiving after Isaiah had relations with her.

There is no similar account of the child's conception here. More importantly, the child is a sign expressly given to the king, which would give weight to the possibility that the maiden in question is within the king's house. This is further strengthened by the way that the child is bound up with the destiny of the king's house.

Yet more support for this theory comes from the connection between Emmanuel and the child in Isaiah chapter 9 verses 6-7. Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end. On the throne of David and over his kingdom to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and forevermore.

The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this. Putting the larger picture together, several commentators argue that the figure in view here is Hezekiah, the son of Ahaz, who would be a righteous king. In the concluding chapters of this section of Isaiah, Hezekiah would show faith that contrasted with his father Ahaz's unbelief.

His birth in the house of David would be the first glimmer of a possible new dawn for the people, of a reversal of their fortunes, of new life after devastating judgment and of a change of heart. The main problem for this theory is reconciling it with the chronology of 2 Kings. However, the chronology of 2 Kings is a very shaky foundation upon which to build.

It's like a jigsaw puzzle with many of the pieces missing. There are uncertainties about the duration of co-regencies, for instance, that makes it challenging to construct a coherent picture. 2 Kings 18-1-2 seems to present Hezekiah as beginning to reign at the age of 25.

However, earlier in 2 Kings 16-2 we were informed that Ahaz, Hezekiah's father, began to reign at the age of 20 years and reigned for 16 years, presumably dying at around the age of 36. The problem here is that this would suggest that Hezekiah was conceived when his father was still around 10 years of age. We are almost certainly missing some part of the picture here, or perhaps some detail of the text of 2 Kings has been corrupted.

Further problems arise even in terms of 2 Kings itself, as events dated to the 14th year of Hezekiah's reign, in chapter 18 verse 13, occurred in 701 BC, which implies that he came to the throne in 715 BC, seven years after the Northern Kingdom had been destroyed. And yet, in chapter 18 verse 1, we're told that he began to reign in the third year of Hoshea, king of Israel. It isn't merely the fact that Ahaz is supposedly under 10 years of age at the time of Hezekiah's conception that is a problem with the surface appearance of the numbers of kings.

Clearly, there is a period of co-regency, usurpation, or some problem of textual transmission of the relevant numbers here. Greatly weakening the supposed counter-evidence provided by 2 Kings against the identification of this figure of Emmanuel with Hezekiah. The story of Israel and Judah's kings is, as commentators both conservative or liberal almost universally recognize, not one of stable and untroubled succession, but one that judders and jolts, with omissions and overlaps.

Hezekiah, then, is the most likely candidate for the figure of Emmanuel here. In Isaiah, he represents the hope of the house of David and the inverse of his wicked father Ahaz. Emmanuel, God with us, is a name that fits the historical figure of Hezekiah very well.

Hezekiah and his reign are described in 2 Kings chapter 18 verses 5 to 7. The fulfillment of the Lord's word is mapped onto the stages of the infant and child Hezekiah's growth and his maturation towards kingship. While curds and honey might refer to foods that a child starts to eat at an earlier stage of their development, in the context it is more likely that they were specific forms of food associated with a land that had fallen into disuse and was uncultivated. We see this in verse 22 of this chapter.

Curds and honey were foods drawn more directly from the land, and they recall the blessed character of the land, a land flowing with milk and honey. However, they are also wilderness foods, the foods that people would return to after cultivated land reverted to its wilderness state. Likewise, if we take Emmanuel to be the Davidic heir Hezekiah, the reference to knowing how to refuse the evil and choose the good might not be a reference to a level of early childhood maturity as many suppose, but rather a

reference to attaining to rule.

We see Solomon using similar language of his exercise of rule in 1 Kings chapter 3 verse 9. Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people, that I may discern between good and evil, but who is able to govern this your great people? Before Hezekiah attains his majority and accedes to rule, Aram and Israel will be forsaken. However, the news is not all good for Ahaz. There is a much more dreadful foe lying behind Israel and Aram.

The might of Assyria would come up against his land, bringing the darkest days that Judah had experienced since its earliest days with the division of the kingdom. In Isaiah chapter 5 verses 26 to 30, the Lord had declared that he would whistle for foreign nations to come up against his land and people. At the end of chapter 7, we return to this image.

The Lord would whistle for the might of Egypt and Assyria, the fly and the bee, who would come up against the land and overwhelm it with their multitudes. Assyria is compared to a razor with which the Lord would shave his people's heads, beards and the hair of their feet, quite possibly a euphemistic reference to the genitals. The shaving off of hair was a form of extreme humiliation, employed upon prisoners of war for instance.

Judah is going to be shorn of all of its glory, utterly humiliated. The situation that will result from the humiliation that Assyria will bring upon the land is a seemingly contradictory one. On the one hand, the land will be utterly devastated, reverting to a wilderness state.

Former vineyards, their walls broken down and their terraces overrun with thorns and briars, as the vineyard of Israel itself in chapter 5, would now become places to hunt and trap wild beasts. Hunters, gatherers and nomadic herdsmen taking the place of farmers and settled forms of existence in the land. On the other hand, however, it will be a time during which the people will enjoy the natural bounty of the promised land, as a land flowing with curds and honey.

While the remnant of the people will depend largely upon the uncultivated foods of the land, in the wake of the Assyrian bee, honey will be plentiful and cow's milk will be so abundant that they will feast on curds. Here, as elsewhere in this chapter, we see the two-sided character of Isaiah's message, which is one of the most horrific destruction, but also one of a blessed re-establishment for the people on the other side of that judgment. A question to consider, Isaiah's prophecy of Emmanuel is prominently used in Matthew chapter 1 verses 20-25.

How, given our understanding of the original context and referent of Isaiah's prophecy, does the evangelist's use of this prophecy take on a richer import? Isaiah chapter 8 comes in the context of the Syro-Ephraimite war and the threat of the alliance of Rezan

the king of Syria and Pekah the king of Israel. These kings have come up against Judah and against Jerusalem to attack King Ahaz, to replace him with a puppet king that will fight on their side in their anti-Assyrian alliance. Already in the preceding chapter we had two sons with significant names.

Shiar-Jashub, a remnant, will return, and Emmanuel, God with us. Within chapter 8 we have another child that will serve as a prophetic sign. Isaiah is instructed to perform a prophetic sign act as other prophets such as Jeremiah or Ezekiel.

He is charged to write, belonging to Meher Shalal Hashbaz on a large tablet, likely a piece of wood or metal. Joseph Blenkinsop notes that this was probably a placard, designed for public display. The name Meher Shalal Hashbaz means, speed the plunder, hasten the spoil.

Although once Isaiah's son was born the writing would have the sense of belonging to Meher Shalal Hashbaz, at this point in the prophetic sign it isn't clear that the writing is of a name, and rather than belonging to, it might have been understood as concerning. Isaiah was accompanied by two respectable witnesses who could testify to his action. This seems to be one of several examples of prophetic signs that were multi-stage, with the actions that they involved and the meaning of them being revealed over a period of time.

Having performed this act, Isaiah had relations with the prophetess, although we are not told that this was done in response to a divine instruction. The prophetess, presumably his wife, although commentators differ on that question, may have been a prophetess in her own right, along with several other women in the Old and New Testaments. Or perhaps she is just referred to as the prophetess on account of her union with Isaiah the prophet.

Considering that the sign is primarily being performed through and by her in bearing the child, we could at the least understand her being called the prophetess in that sense. However, if she was also known as a prophetess in her own right, the sign might have had more force. There are pronounced similarities between this account and that of Emmanuel in Isaiah chapter 7 verses 14-17.

Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Emmanuel. He shall eat curds and honey when he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good.

For before the boy knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land whose two kings you dread will be deserted. The Lord will bring upon you and upon your people and upon your father's house such days as have not come since the day that Ephraim departed from Judah, the king of Assyria. Blenkinsop notes the parallels.

In both cases there are significant names given. The young woman parallels with the prophetess. The virgin shall conceive and bear a son parallels with the prophetess conceived and bore a son.

She shall call his name Emmanuel parallels with call his name may her shall al-hashbaz. Before the boy knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good parallels with before the boy knows how to cry my father or my mother. Both prophecies also end with a reference to the king of Assyria.

Considering these parallels, the problem of fitting two supposedly successive children and the processes of their development in a short period of time and the references to Emmanuel in chapter 8. Many commentators, Blenkinsop and John Oswald being two examples, argue that what we have here are two accounts of a single sign. As John Watts recognizes however, there is a difference between the age at which an infant can cry my father or my mother and the age at which he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good. Also as Alec Mottier points out, Emmanuel's name connected with the child of chapter 9 is one that means blessing whereas may her shall al-hashbaz's name signifies judgment.

It seems more likely to me that we have two different children as two witnesses to the Lord's promise. The first, Emmanuel, being Hezekiah who is born to the young queen of Ahaz and the second being the son of Isaiah and his wife, the prophetess. We could perhaps see this as similar to the paired births of John the Baptist and Jesus at the beginning of the Gospel of Luke.

In naming his own child as his prophecy and attaching the fulfillment of the prophecy to an early event in the child's development, Isaiah was, apart from anything else, really committing himself to his message. The prophecy would shortly be fulfilled, even against appearances. The king of Assyria would come upon Syria and Israel and Reza and Ampika's invasion of Judah would be halted.

In 734 BC Tiglath-Pileser cut off the support of Egypt to the anti-Assyrian alliance. In the next two years he took extensive territory from Israel in Galilee and the Transjordan and he defeated Damascus in 732 BC. In verse 5 we seem to move forward in time.

Tiglath-Pileser III has forced Pika king of Israel and Rezan king of Syria to withdraw, abandoning their invasion of Judah. Their lands were now being ravaged by the Assyrians. The people of Judah and Jerusalem were rejoicing over the downfall of their enemies, although the phrase is difficult to interpret.

However, they had rejected the gentle stream of Shiloah, the waters diverted from the Sihon Spring, in the conduits that irrigated the city's pools. This image of the gentle waters near the city is an image of the aid and the sustenance that the Lord provides to his people. Judah had turned to Assyria, against whom they would later rebel, rather

than trusting in the Lord.

At this point in time they were presumably congratulating themselves on their canny foreign policy. Ahaz's shrewdness in allying with Assyria seemed to have saved them in their hour of need. However, as they rejected the Lord, the mighty waters of the Euphrates, the great river, would be brought against them, representing the king of Assyria and all of his forces.

The waters of the Euphrates, the power of Assyria, would overflow its banks and the region would be deluged. Judah would be largely overwhelmed and the waters would come up to the very neck of Jerusalem. Meher-shal-al-hashbaz's name would be fulfilled against them.

The land is described as Emmanuel's land, which perhaps adds weight to the idea that Emmanuel is a royal child. Yet with the description of the land as Emmanuel's, the tone of the prophecy shifts. The Assyrians will come up against and overwhelm the land of Judah, but they will be shattered, failing in their design.

Ultimately their purposes will not stand because of the promise of Emmanuel, God is with us. The second half of the chapter sums up many of the themes of the section. The prophet is called to be a messenger, a sign and a model to the people in difficult days.

In faithfully holding to the word of the Lord, he sets a pattern for others. He is warned against following the behaviour and adopting the attitudes of his compatriots. In chapter 6, Isaiah described himself as a man of unclean lips, dwelling among a people of unclean lips.

Here he is given instructions in how to stand apart from his contemporaries. The meaning of conspiracies in verse 12 is difficult to determine. Perhaps it's a reference to an alliance between Judah and Assyria, initially created out of fear of Israel and Syria, and then later developed out of fear of Assyria's dominance within the region.

Alternatively, maybe there are dark rumours of a fifth column in Judah, or speculations and intrigue about Ahaz's government and their dark purposes. Oswald suggests, along with a number of other commentators, that rather than focus upon a particular conspiracy, this likely refers to a general approach to the explanation of events, especially unpleasant events. The danger in times of uncertainty and instability is to become paranoid and to turn to conspiracy theories, believing that the world is primarily controlled by shadowy human powers.

Isaiah's message, however, is that man is but flesh, his life is as fleeting as the breath in his nostrils. Conspiracy theories can be a sort of false doctrine of providence, where fear of shadowy human agencies and the assumption that they wield vast powers and control can take the place of confidence in the Lord. Such a confidence in the Lord will greatly

demystify and deflate our view of human powers.

Late in Isaiah, idols, which hold people in their thrall, are deconstructed by the Prophet, broken down to their component elements and the processes of their construction. One might see the Lord as engaging in something similar with human powers and authorities here. As we saw in the preceding chapter, for instance, when you consider Israel and Syria, they have two cities, Samaria and Damascus, at their hearts, and two weak men as their kings, Pekah and Rezan.

What initially looks like an irresistible force is demystified and broken down to size. When you fear the Lord and honour him above all, you are unlikely to have exaggerated views of the scope, scale and effectiveness of human power, knowledge and will, and conspiracy theories can become a lot less persuasive. By failing to trust the Lord and thinking in terms of human conspiracies, when the chips were down, Judah had turned to political machinations and intrigue, trusting in human power, which would ultimately bring ruin upon them.

In verses 14 and 15 we see that the Lord would simultaneously be a sanctuary and a stone of offence. Those who trusted in the Lord would find security and safety under his protection. But those who lost their nerve and turned to conspiracy theories and human powers and intrigue, rather than to the Lord, would stumble and be broken or snared.

Those who did not base their lives and purposes upon the Lord would find that he was their great obstacle, the one frustrating their designs at every step. In verses 16 to 18, it seems likely that Isaiah withdrew from his public participation in the discourse surrounding the Syro-Ephraimite crisis. He bound and sealed his testimony concerning the future and committed it to the charge of his disciples.

The disciples of Isaiah need not be considered as a school around him, but this does suggest that he had some followers. His words could have been produced by them in the future, at the time when they were vindicated. The time would come when the Lord would no longer hide his face from Judah, and when Isaiah's words and the signs of his own actions and the names of his sons would be fulfilled.

Brother Charles writes of this particular passage, where the Lord's word is not heard, the temptation is to turn to divination and other forms of pagan practices, to the dark words of soothsayers, mediums and those who spoke to the dead, instead of the clarity of the word of the Lord. Against such occult practices, Isaiah directs people to the teaching and the testimony of the Lord. These are the touchstone of all truth.

Any who reject such words will grope in the darkness, starved of knowledge and guidance, distressed in their fear, resentful and bitter in their suffering, stumbling further and further into the gloom. A question to consider. In this chapter we see two contrasting fears, the fear of the Lord and the fear of human powers and agencies.



Reflecting more closely upon this passage and elsewhere in scripture, how can the fear of the Lord release us from the fear of human powers? The end of Isaiah chapter 8 spoke of the gloom of the people without the light of the word of the Lord, who had turned to the occult for revelation. Chapter 9 begins by speaking about a reversal. The land of Zebulun and Naphtali had been taken by Tiglath-Pileser III, as described in 2 Kings 15 verse 29.

In the days of Pekah king of Israel, Tiglath-Pileser king of Assyria came and captured Ijon, Abel Bethmeacha, Gena, Kedesh, Hazor, Gilead and Galilee, all the land of Naphtali, and he carried the people captive to Assyria. The Transjordan was the land that used to be owned by the two and a half tribes, Reuben Gad and the half tribe of Manasseh. The northern tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali had struggled to gain full possession of their land, and at many points in the nation's history, parts of this land or even the whole of the land had been lost.

Galilee of the Gentiles, not usually referred to in such a manner, was a more melting pot region to the north of the Jezreel valley, around the lake that we would call the Sea of Galilee. There are a number of questions about this opening verse. Many commentators separate it from the material that immediately follows it in verses 2 to 7, connecting it instead with the material of the preceding chapter.

Others wonder whether the second half of it should be understood as, but in the latter time, he has treated harshly the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations. In Matthew chapter 4 verses 13 to 16, verses 1 and 2 of this chapter are connected together. And leaving Nazareth he went and lived in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, so that what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled.

The land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, the way of the sea, beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles, the people dwelling in darkness have seen a great light, and for those dwelling in the region and shadow of death, on them a light has dawned. Unlike those in the nation who pursued false gods and mediums and soothed saying, a glorious new dawn would come for those who waited for the Lord. These are verses familiar from many nativity plays and from lessons and carols, most memorably presented in Handel's Messiah.

The promised new dawn seems to be arising in the very regions of northern Israel, first annexed by Tiglath-Pileser III, Naphtali and Zebulun. Expressed in a form akin to that of thanksgiving him, the prophet's announcement of the reversal of Judah's circumstances is compared, not only to a great dawn, but also to the joy of harvest, and the celebrations that follow a decisive victory over an oppressor, the bringing in of a new era of peace. Deliverance from oppression is described using language recalling the Exodus, and also there is a reference made back to the victory over the Midianites, through the

work of Gideon.

In the story of Gideon, the Lord had used a very small force to defeat a much larger one. All of these things are spoken of as if they had already happened, although they are still awaited in the future. The event that has led to this celebration is the birth of a child, a crown prince and an heir to the throne of David.

A few significant children were mentioned in the preceding chapters. Some commentators have seen the description of verse 6 as relating to, anticipating or taking on the form of a coronation ceremony. To support this position, they have pointed to some supposed parallels within the Psalms.

Today I have begotten you. In that verse, a coronation seems to be described as if it were the birth of a son. In Psalm 45 verses 6-7 Some have seen in this statement a king being referred to as a god, perhaps akin to the way that the Lord describes Moses as like God to Pharaoh.

Psalm 72 verse 17 Here they argue the Psalmist wishes that a particular Davidic king would have an everlasting dominion. This would fit with statements like, For this reason, they believe that these titles can be referred to a human king. Other commentators, such as John Goldengay, have taken what most commentators take to be referring to titles for the king as being a long sentence referring to the Lord's activity.

This, he argues, is far more in keeping with the way that these names have worked elsewhere in the book. Meher shal al-Hashbaz, for instance, is not a title for the son. The name, rather, is a prophecy about what the Assyrians will do to the northern kingdom of Israel and to the Arameans.

Like many Jewish commentators, Goldengay argues that the child is probably King Hezekiah, the Davidic son who has just been born. He heralds the turn of the fortunes for the southern kingdom in the Syro-Ephraimite War. The sign of David's heir is an auspicious indicator of the positive destiny for a formerly oppressed nation, a galvanisation of its sovereignty and a promise of its enjoyment of peace in the years to come.

It does seem appropriate that in the first instance this promise should settle upon the character of Hezekiah. However, it is hard not to see the words of this chapter straining forward to some fulfilment far in the future, a more eschatological messianic figure upon whom the full weight of these words can be borne. Naturally and appropriately, Christians have connected this with the character of Jesus.

If we take the name as a series of titles, they seem to divide into four. Wonderful Counselor relates to extraordinary wisdom and guidance, or perhaps wisdom to perform extraordinary things. Mighty God need not necessarily be taken as referring to the child

himself as God.

As Gary Smith notes, many Hebrew names include the name of God within them. However, he suggests that the use of this same phrase in chapter 10 verse 21 suggests that the use of the title here should probably be given more weight. This son is identified with God in some peculiar way.

Everlasting Father perhaps relates to the king as the father of his people. The Everlasting Father would be the one whose throne endured. It is perhaps surprising to have the one who is given as a son referred to as an Everlasting Father.

Prince of Peace is the final title. This king is going to bring a cessation of war. His people will know rest and security under his reign.

Some have suggested reading verse 7 as an expression of a wish that his kingdom would endure forever and that the Lord in his zeal would accomplish it. It seems better to me to read this as a prophecy of what the Lord would achieve. The Lord would, as he had promised within the Davidic Covenant, ensure that the throne of David would endure.

He would do this in his zeal. His zeal as the God who kept his word and his promises. Themes of new birth are of course common within scriptural narratives.

At key moments in biblical narratives and the story of the people of the Lord, a new dawn is seen to arrive with the birth of a child through divine favour and promise, shattering the gloom of a former darkness and serving as a propitious sign of a future that breaks with the oppression of the past. This is most notably seen at the beginning of the book of Exodus, in 1 Samuel, and later in the book of Luke. In each of these books we see an emphasis upon the labour of women and the manner in which they and the children that they bear are the means by which a new hope will arrive.

Such themes are scattered throughout the book of Isaiah, but perhaps most prominently within the two preceding chapters. In chapter 7 verses 14 to 18 and chapter 8 verses 1 to 4, newborn children serve as signs of divine favour and coming deliverance. Later on in chapter 11, infants and young children are integral to Isaiah's vision of a promised era of miraculous peace, of a time when the little child leads lions, where nursing children play by the cobra's hole, and weaned children put their hands in vipers' dens.

The future that the child represents is still far off, and many challenges and difficulties lie between the present and that distant prospect. The child, however, is an embodiment of the nation's hopes, and he must be protected and nurtured like those hopes for many years before the future that he stands for can ever be realised. God's gift of a child is both a foretaste of the promised future and a commitment to provide in the interim.

After the crashing blow that the northern kingdom of Israel had received from the Assyrians, they presumed that they could rebuild again. Indeed, the calamity that had

befallen them would provide them with the opportunity and occasion to build back on a greater scale and with better materials. Bricks would be replaced with dressed stones, sycamores with cedars.

However, the fundamental weakness of the people, the pride upon which they're trying to build, is still going to be their downfall. The Lord is going to raise up enemies against them and frustrate them in their endeavours. His anger has not yet been spent upon the northern kingdom.

Destruction would come upon them all of a sudden, and it would hit every single part of the nation, those at the head and those at the tail, from the leading elders and nobles to the lying prophets. They would all be cut off. The corruption of the nation is comprehensive.

Everyone is godless and an evildoer. Every mouth speaks folly. The Lord would not assist their young men in battle.

He would not even have compassion upon the fatherless and the widows among them. There were no innocent parties. All would face destruction.

In 722 BC, the northern kingdom would finally fall to Assyria. And yet the Lord's anger would still not yet be spent. Verses 18 and 19 describe two fires.

The fire of the people's wickedness that consumes the land, and the fire of the Lord's wrath by which the land is also consumed. These two fires are of course related. The first fire has brought the second fire upon them.

And the northern kingdom is devouring itself. Pekah the son of Ramalai was assassinated by Hoshea. In this, Hoshea was continuing a long tradition of assassination and intrigue in the northern kingdom.

For example, Pekah the son of Ramalai had also slain his predecessor. In addition to the northern kingdom devouring itself, it was also seeking to devour its brothers to the south, the kingdom of Judah. Despite the judgment and the destruction that the Lord had already brought upon the northern kingdom, his wrath was still against his people.

His hands still stretched out. A question to consider. How does the child whose birth is declared at the beginning of this chapter fulfill the promises of the Davidic covenant? Azar chapter 10 speaks of the judgment yet to fall upon the southern kingdom of Judah by means of Assyria, and then of the Lord's judgment of Assyria itself.

Addressing a situation after the Syro-Ephraimite war, and after the destruction of the northern kingdom, it looks forward to 701 BC and beyond. Under King Ahaz, Judah had looked to the Assyrians to help to deliver it from Israel and the Arameans. Tiglath-Pileser III had fought against these two nations and helped to deliver Judah in the process.

However, in the process of all of this, Judah had entered into a very religiously and politically compromising relationship with Assyria. This is described in 2 Kings chapter 16 verses 7 to 11. So Ahaz sent messengers to Tiglath-Pileser, king of Assyria, saying, I am your servant and your son.

Come up and rescue me from the hand of the king of Assyria and from the hand of the king of Israel, who are attacking me. Ahaz also took the silver and gold that was found in the house of the Lord and in the treasures of the king's house, and sent a present to the king of Assyria. And the king of Assyria listened to him.

The king of Assyria marched up against Damascus and took it, carrying its people captive to Ker, and he killed Rezan. When king Ahaz went to Damascus to meet Tiglath-Pileser, king of Assyria, he saw the altar that was at Damascus. And king Ahaz sent to Uriah the priest a model of the altar and its pattern exact in all its details.

And Uriah the priest built the altar in accordance with all that king Ahaz had sent from Damascus. So Uriah the priest made it, before king Ahaz arrived from Damascus. Tiglath-Pileser had been succeeded by Shalmaneser V, who had laid siege to Samaria, which most likely fell after his death to his successor Sargon II.

It is likely that Sargon II was on the throne of Assyria when this prophecy was made. Sargon would be succeeded by Sennacherib, who had come up against Judah in 701 BC. The chapter begins with another woe oracle in verses 1 to 4. This woe oracle is punctuated by the same statement as that used in chapter 9, verse 12, 17 and 21.

For all this his anger has not turned away and his hand is stretched out still. There were a series of woes that began in the same way as this woe back in chapter 5, in verses 8, 11, 18, 20, 21 and 22, along with the statement concerning the Lord's continuing wrath. This has led many commentators to argue that at least some of the material of this chapter originally belonged with earlier material in the book, but was divided by intervening material in chapters 6 to 9. This position is by no means held by all commentators, however.

The opening woe oracle of this chapter continues to be addressed to Judah, particularly focusing upon the injustice of its society and the failure of its rulers. Those who had not paid any concern to the fatherless and the widows and the poor of the people would not be heard when they appealed to the Lord for his help in the day of their trouble. In the day when the Lord came in judgment upon them, they would realize the futility of their wealth, they would lose all of the spoils of their injustice, and merely experience the bitter wages of their iniquity.

After this opening indictment of Judah and its leaders, and the systemic injustice within their society, the Lord turns in judgment to Assyria. Assyria had vaunted itself as this great mighty power, boasting against all of the nations that it had defeated. We might

get some sense of the hubris and the pride of Assyria from the Rabshakeh's speech in chapter 36.

There he argues that Judah does not have enough idols and high places to really threaten the Assyrians. The Lord had used Assyria as the means of his judgment against Israel and Judah. The idea of a god taking the side of the enemies of his people in such a manner might have been strange to many of the people of Isaiah's day.

Yet the Lord has used Assyria as the means of his judgment. It is by the Lord's command and decree that Assyria has been successful in breaking down all of these nations, chief among them Israel and Judah. However, Assyria, puffed up in its pride, has no realization of this.

Assyria reasons that none of the nations are great enough to stand against him and his gods. The city of Samaria is little different from a city like Damascus. It too is seen as a place of idols, a place of gods who can be overthrown with the city.

The idea that the most high god claims the people of Samaria as his people would be strange to the king of Assyria. His imaginative world is only populated by idols and false gods. He has no imaginative concept of the true god, the creator and the judge of all.

Consequently, he fancies himself able to do as he pleases and borrows himself over all others, not humbling himself before God. He speaks of himself in his mind as if he were a god himself. To his mind, his strength and his wisdom are near divine.

He is the one that sets the boundaries of the world. Yet the lord, as he does with the proud, would humble him. Assyria would fail to secure the sort of victory that they were looking for in Jerusalem.

They would lose 185,000 people in one day. This is likely what is referred to in verse 16, the wasting sickness among the stout warriors of Assyria. After the lord's great defeat of Assyria, Judah would cease to depend upon Assyria as its support.

Rather, it would turn to the lord. Verse 21 seems to be an allusion back to the name Shear-Jeshub, the son of Izer whose name meant a remnant will return. Maybe the mighty god here also alludes back to chapter 9 verse 6. Although Israel as the descendants of Abraham were like the sand of the sea, the lord would wipe out most of them in his judgment.

Reminding his people of his great deliverances and judgments in the past, the lord encourages his people not to be afraid of the Assyrians. He would deliver them as he had delivered them in the time of the Exodus, and also as in the miraculous victory over the Midianites in the time of Gideon. As in the deliverance from Midian, the great victory would not be achieved by strength of human arms.

The reminder of the story of Gideon's defeat of Midian also should draw our minds back to Isaiah chapter 9 verse 4. For the yoke of his burden, and the staff for his shoulder, the rod of his oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian. If the most immediate figure in view is the fulfillment of this is King Hezekiah, then both of these prophecies likely look forward to the events of 701 BC. The lord would strike Judah with the rod of his anger in Assyria.

He would destroy most of their fortified cities, and the waters of Assyria would come up to the neck of Jerusalem. However, as at the deliverance of the Red Sea, the lord would lift up his staff against the people of Assyria, and make a path for his people to pass through that trial. The final verses of the chapter describe a force coming up towards Jerusalem.

It does not seem to describe the course that was taken by Sennacherib in 701 BC. It is quite likely not intended to be taken literally, or perhaps it's referring to events that have not been recorded for us in the histories. Commentators are divided about the referent of the final two verses.

Is it a reference to Assyria, or is it a reference to Judah? I think it's most likely a reference to Judah, partly on the basis of the imagery, but also on the basis of verse 1 of chapter 11. The shoot that comes forth from the stump would naturally fit in with the imagery of the lopped boughs and the cut down trees. A question to consider.

What lessons can we learn about divine providence from the image of Assyria as the axe in the hands of the lord? Isaiah chapter 10 declared the lord's coming judgement upon his people, describing the destruction brought by the Assyrians as if it were the great felling of a mighty forest, with the nation of Assyria serving as the lord's axe. Such imagery of the cutting down of the proud and the lofty trees of the land has been prominent throughout the book of Isaiah to this point, introduced in places like chapter 2 verses 12-13. Elsewhere, in places like chapter 5, the vineyard is made into a place of thorns and briars, verses 5-6 of that chapter.

I will break down its wall and it shall be trampled down. I will make it a waste, it shall not be pruned or hoed, and briars and thorns shall grow up. I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain upon it.

Another image of the cutting down of trees is found at the end of Isaiah's commission in chapter 6, verses 11-13 of that chapter. The land is a desolate waste, and the Lord removes people far away, and the forsaken places are many in the midst of the land. And though a tenth remain in it, it will be burned again, like a terebinth or an oak, whose stump remains when it is felled.

The holy seed is its stump. The preceding chapter ended with another image of trees being cut down, in verses 33-34 of chapter 10. The Lord will prune down, and the lofty

will be brought low.

He will cut down the thickets of the forest with an axe, and Lebanon will fall by the majestic one. Commentators differ over whether this is referring to Judah, or the Lord's judgment upon Assyria with which much of chapter 10 is concerned. Whichever of the two it is, within chapter 10 we do read of the Lord's judgment upon his people as a sort of deforestation of the land.

Assyria is the axe of the Lord's wrath, and with Assyria he has been chopping down the proud and the lofty. The chopping down of the mighty trees of the land is so devastating that the Davidic dynasty itself is presented as if it were cut down beyond David himself, down to the very stump of Jesse, David's father. Jesse wasn't a man of great significance beyond being the father of David.

When the Davidic dynasty is felled, he is all that remains. The axe of the Lord will leave little behind it. We might also think of the stump of Jesse as the reduced kingdom after the invasion of the Assyrians.

The Assyrians in 701 BC came up to the neck of Jerusalem, and almost wiped it out. And from that stump a glorious nation will arise. New life will spring up after devastation.

Chapter 11 is a prophecy of great promise, speaking into a situation of near desolation and extinction, assuring the people that the Lord can build up from the rubble. The chopped and the charred stump of what was once the glorious Davidic dynasty stands in the wasteland of Judah. However, a small shoot emerges from the seemingly dead stump.

It becomes a branch, and the branch bears fruit. The branch is a prophetic symbol referring to a messianic figure, one who will represent the Davidic kingdom and restore the temple, leading the people into a time beyond judgment. We read of the figure of the branch in Zechariah.

Jeremiah also speaks of the branch in chapter 23 verses 5-6, and then later in chapter 33 verses 15-16. In the former chapter he writes, In Azar chapter 11, the Davidic branch is life from the dead. David died, and then his dynasty seemingly died.

But now it is rising again, and new life is coming up from it. The Davidic branch, the messianic figure, will be anointed by the Spirit. The Spirit of the Lord will rest upon him in a fourfold way.

Verse 2 makes four parallel statements about the Spirit in relation to the branch, but seven characteristics of the Spirit are mentioned. The Spirit is the Spirit of the Lord, of wisdom, understanding, counsel, might, knowledge, and the fear of the Lord. These are the virtues needed by a great king, who can establish, protect, and rule his people well.



The branch will be characterized by just rule. He will be impartial and equitable in his judgment and execution of justice. He will ensure that the poor and the meek receive justice, both righteously judging their disputes and ensuring that judgment is executed speedily.

He will speak with an authority that cuts off oppressors and wrongdoers. And the result of the rule of the branch will be the establishment of a new Eden, an Eden that exceeds even the original. The original Eden was a garden in an almost entirely untamed world, but this new Eden will have a peace that flows out into the wider world.

Predatory animals will have been tamed, and will coexist even with children and the more vulnerable domesticated animals. We could take this imagery in a number of different ways. Perhaps it is a more literal account of the end of predation.

Perhaps it's a more figurative account of peace more generally. Or perhaps the animals more specifically symbolize predatory nations. The knowledge of the Lord, direct experience of his salvation, and familiarity with his character and ways will fill the earth.

And when that day comes, the branch will stand as a signal in the midst of the nations, all of the nations flocking to learn from him. Back in chapter 5 verse 26, the Lord spoke of setting up a signal for the nations, summoning nations to come in judgment upon his people. Now, however, the Lord will recover the remnant of his people from the lands to which he scattered them.

The nations that were once used to scatter them will now be used to gather them. He will raise the signal and draw them back. The once divided kingdom will be unified.

A new exodus-like event will occur, and the people will be assembled from all of the corners of the earth, established secure over their enemies. Natural barriers will be removed or overcome, and Israel will be replanted, secure against its enemies. A deep challenge for interpreters of these words of Isaiah is whether they actually came to pass.

Christopher Seitz notes the higher standards to which prophecies of salvation seem to be held in scripture. Observing Jeremiah chapter 28 verses 8 to 9, there Jeremiah the prophet challenges Hananiah, saying, The prophets who preceded you and me from ancient times prophesied war, famine, and pestilence against many countries and great kingdoms. As for the prophet who prophesies peace, when the word of that prophet comes to pass, then it will be known that the Lord has truly sent the prophet.

In the book of Isaiah to this point, we've had some very accurate prophecies both of judgment and of salvation, prophecies that would be fulfilled in the lifetime of the prophet who delivered them. However, interspersed with these, there are prophecies that seem to strain for a far greater fulfillment, a fulfillment that in its fullest sense does not seem to have occurred within the expected time frame. In some of these cases, we

could argue for anticipatory or partial fulfillments, but the description of the messianic figure in this passage, for instance, does not seem to fit well the character of Hezekiah, and certainly not his son Manasseh.

Although life would come up again from the root of Jesse, and there would be some measure of a restoration, the prophecy of this chapter could not reasonably be said to be fulfilled in the years following 701 BC. Some measure of a greater fulfillment could be said to occur after the Babylonian exile. At that time, some people who had been in exile would return to the land, and there would be something of a flourishing of the people.

And yet, for all the blessing that the Lord gave to his people in that period, there was nothing of the scale of the promise that is given in chapter 2, verses 1 to 4, or here concerning the root of Jesse. The branch is still an anticipated figure in the book of Zechariah. There is, of course, a much greater fulfillment of this to be seen in the figure of Christ, in whom the figure of the Davidic branch is fully realized.

He will pacify the nations, subduing them to the authority of his word, teaching them peace and taming the once wild beasts. He is the one who has the Holy Spirit without measure, who gathers his people from all corners and accomplishes a new exodus, establishing a new people in security. Nations that were once at war with each other are gathered to the mountain of the Lord, where they seek the branch.

The knowledge of the Lord covers the earth, with people of all tribes, tongues and nations experiencing the salvation and goodness of God. Old enmities are overcome, and where once all trees were felled, a mighty forest of cedars rises, a temple of the Lord's dwelling by his Holy Spirit. Of course, even in the current day, we look forward to a yet greater fulfillment of this in the age to come.

Here, then, we see a feature that is common in much of biblical prophecy. In connection with the coming day of the Lord, people receive promises of, and a foretaste of, a much more glorious visitation in a yet distant horizon. A question to consider, reading this prophecy alongside that of chapter 2, what elements does this chapter bring to its vision of the future that were absent in that earlier chapter? The few verses of Isaiah chapter 12 bring to an end the section of the book that began either in chapter 6 or chapter 7. At the end of Isaiah chapter 11, there was a recollection of the deliverance of Israel at the Red Sea in the story of the Exodus.

Verses 15 and 16 of that chapter read as follows, And the Lord will utterly destroy the tongue of the Sea of Egypt, and will wave his hand over the river with his scorching breath, and strike it into seven channels, and he will lead people across in sandals. And there will be a highway from Assyria for the remnant that remains of his people, as there was for Israel when they came up from the land of Egypt. Both the preparation of a path through the wilderness and the opening up of a passage through the sea should remind us of the story of the Exodus from Egypt.

Chapter 12 is a reframing of the subsequent song of Moses in the context of a new deliverance, a new Exodus. Just as Moses sang his song after the original crossing in Exodus chapter 15, so the redeemed in the eschatological deliverance in Isaiah's prophecy would sing a new song too, one which hearkened back to that of Moses. Richard Borkham observes that the song in Isaiah chapter 12 is clearly playing after that song of Moses from Exodus chapter 15.

It isn't an entirely novel composition. It picks up the words of the opening verses of Moses' song in Exodus chapter 15 verses 1 to 2, for instance. Then Moses and the people of Israel sang this song to the Lord, saying, I will sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously, the horse and his rider he has thrown into the sea.

The Lord is my strength and my song, and he has become my salvation. This is my God, and I will praise him, my Father's God, and I will exalt him. An even stronger background for the song's Isaiah chapter 12 is found in Psalm 105.

In verses 1 to 2 of that Psalm we read, Sing to him, sing praises to him, tell of all his wondrous works. A similar verse is found in Psalm 148 verse 13. Borkham observes the way that Psalm 105 was verbally linked with Exodus chapter 15.

However, these links are principally found in places other than those in which its language is adopted by Isaiah chapter 12. In its sharing of key terminology with Exodus chapter 15, Psalm 105 was seen to function as a sort of an interpretation of that earlier song. In chapter 12 of his prophecy, Isaiah is using that earlier interpretation to develop his own resetting of the song of the sea.

These songs form a natural conclusion of the wider section. And there are two songs, one from the second half of verse 1 to verse 2, and the other from verses 4 to 6. They use language that should now be familiar in that day. Yet whereas that coming day has often been spoken of to this point as a day of judgment and doom, here it is that day's aspect of salvation that is very much to the fore.

That day will mark the passing of the Lord's anger against his people. The Lord has purged his people through judgment, and as the remnant is established, they know salvation in the Lord. The direct identification of the Lord with salvation is of course familiar from the earlier song of the sea.

And the statement, I will trust and will not be afraid, is very much in keeping with the wider themes of this section. Ahaz, faced with the threat of the Syro-Ephraimite invasion, was charged to trust and not to fear. And here we see the vindication of that particular posture.

Just as the Lord provided water for his people in the wilderness, so the Lord provides the wells of salvation for his people in their need. As God himself is the salvation of his

people, the waters of these wells of salvation should perhaps be related with the Lord's own personal presence with his people. If the first song focuses upon the speaker's own relationship with the Lord, and his own personal trust in the Lord, the second song is a more outward-looking statement of the greatness of the Lord's acts of salvation, declared to other people.

The first song opens with a statement of the speaker to the Lord, and then a declaration of his faith and confidence in the Lord. In the second song, he is summoning others to join with him in his praise. The Lord's praises will be declared among his people, and declared in such a manner that all of the nations will become witness to his greatness.

The greatness of God is seen in his identity as the Holy One of Israel. God acts for the sake of his holy name, as we see in places like Ezekiel 36, verses 22-23. Therefore say to the house of Israel, Thus says the Lord God, It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am about to act, but for the sake of my holy name, which you have profaned among the nations to which you came.

And I will vindicate the holiness of my great name, which has been profaned among the nations, and which you have profaned among them. And the nations will know that I am the Lord, declares the Lord God, when through you I vindicate my holiness before their eyes. Through his work of salvation, the Lord demonstrates that he alone is the Lord.

He is unique and set apart from all others. A question to consider, how is Isaiah chapter 12 used in the vision of Revelation chapter 15? Isaiah chapter 13 opens a new section of the book. This section, by various reckonings, runs up to either chapter 23 or chapter 27.

It chiefly concerns the nations, but Judah is also frequently addressed within it. There are similarities between this section of the book and places like Jeremiah chapters 46-51 or Ezekiel chapters 25-32. Chapters 1-12 of Isaiah move from the period of the reign of King Uzziah to the Syro-Ephraimite war of the 730s BC and anticipates the Assyrian crisis that followed around 701 BC.

In this new section it is Babylon that takes centre stage from the outset and Assyria largely seems to have fallen out of view. Outside of the brief appearance in chapter 14 verses 24-27 it does not appear much. Those words come at the end of the oracle concerning Babylon and have led some commentators to believe that what we have here is a later editorial reworking of material that formerly addressed Assyria.

As it speaks about the downfall of Babylon at the hands of the Medes, it would seem to extend the historical scope of these chapters of Isaiah from the 8th century threat of the Assyrians to the rise of the Babylonians at the end of the 7th century and their dominance through much of the 6th century before the Babylonian Empire fell to the Medes and the Persians around 539 BC. There are certainly strong analogies to be seen between Babylon as depicted here and the nation of Assyria as we have seen elsewhere

in the prophecy. The nation by whom the Lord affects his judgement will itself be judged.

The relationship between this section and that which preceded it might not be straightforwardly chronological in character but given the typological similarities between Assyria and Babylon we should not treat this section of the book as if it were detached from that which preceded it. The Neo-Babylonian Empire succeeded the Neo-Assyrian Empire at the end of the 7th century BC. As I have already noted, some commentators argue that the prophecy here originally referred to Assyria before being reworked to refer to Babylon.

Babylon is certainly similar to and related to the Assyrian Empire in various respects. Most commentators relate this chapter to Babylon in the context of its ascendancy and its destruction of Jerusalem at the end of the 7th century and beginning of the 6th. However, the work of Seth Olanson, *The Burden of Babylon*, has given more support to the claims of those who see chapters 13 and 14 of Isaiah as referring to the Babylon of Isaiah's own time rather than to a Babylon of almost 100 years later.

John Oswald, one who follows Olanson's thesis, argues that Babylon was culturally dominant even though not the heart of the empire that it would later become. Babylon enjoyed some independence and Sargon II lost control of it to Merodac Baladan. It functioned as, in his words, a symbol for Mesopotamia's glory and pride.

In 689 BC, Sennacherib crushed Babylon's rebellion and destroyed the city and its chief buildings, a far more destructive defeat of the city than that which it suffered later on in 539 BC. The greatest benefit of Olanson's thesis would be placing all of these events in the context of the Assyrian hegemony of the region. This might make more sense of chapter 14 verses 24-27 and the reference to the death of Ahaz.

However, it still leaves us with the question of why Assyria doesn't have a more prominent part to play. There are also some more serious problems for Olanson's theory. The oppressive Babylon mentioned here far more readily fits the Babylon that we have at the end of the 7th century and into the 6th than it does the Babylon of Merodac Baladan's time.

Furthermore, the role of the Medes in verse 17 seems also not to fit with the period of Merodac Baladan, when the Medes were not opponents of the Babylonians at all. Putting these problems to one side, one of the things that these chapters do that fit in with what has happened previously is placing the nations in their proper perspective. The Lord is over and the master of all of the nations.

He is the one who controls and moves all of the playing pieces on the board. There is, as Oswald notes, a coherent argument to be observed here. The chapter opens with a new superscription, as in chapter 1 verse 1 and chapter 2 verse 1. It is referred to as an oracle.

As Christopher Seitz notes, this term is used on a number of further occasions in the chapters that follow. Many have seen this as a strong indication that we are dealing with a broader section of the larger book. This indeed seems to be the case, although the material of these chapters is not only inclusive of oracles.

There are also woes, for instance, and the oracles that we have are themselves varied in character. The chapter begins with the Lord setting up a signal, summoning people for battle. We have already seen this sort of action back in chapter 5 verse 26.

He will raise a signal for nations far away and whistle for them from the ends of the earth, and behold, quickly, speedily they come. The question, however, is, who are the consecrated ones? Is this Babylon in the period where it would judge the nations, or is it referring to the Medes and the Persians who would judge them? It would seem that on our answer to this question hangs our reading of the verses that follow. They seem to refer to a more general judgment of nations.

Those who think that the consecrated ones are the Babylonians would think of places like Jeremiah chapter 25 verses 11 to 12. This whole land shall become a ruin and a waste, and these nations shall serve the king of Babylon seventy years. Then after seventy years are completed, I will punish the king of Babylon and that nation, the land of the Chaldeans, for their iniquity, declares the Lord, making the land an everlasting waste.

For such a reading, verse 5 would refer to the Babylonians' seventy years' dominance of that region. However, others see this as a reference to the Medes and the Persians that followed them. This would connect these verses with the verses that immediately follow and the reference to the Medes being raised up against them in verse 17.

If the consecrated ones are the Babylonians themselves, however, we would be seeing here another pronounced example of the nation by whom the Lord judged others being judged itself, as in the case of the Assyrians. The day of the Lord would come upon the Babylonians. The scripture speaks of many different days of the Lord.

These various days of the Lord anticipate the great eschatological day of the Lord. They are full stops in the sentences of nations, but they look forward to the greater end of all things, the final judgment when the Lord will judge all of the living and the dead. The focus here is upon the sin of pride, the arrogance, the pomp and the hubris of nations, something that Babylon seemed to represent in an almost archetypal manner, perhaps understandably given its association with the tower and the city of Babel.

The Lord would sap them of courage, might and will, leaving them incapable of standing against their adversaries. The prophet uses the imagery of birth pangs, something that we see elsewhere in places like Jeremiah chapter 4 verse 31. For I heard a cry as of a woman in labour, anguish as of one giving birth to her first child, the cry of the daughter

of Zion, gasping for breath, stretching out her hands.

Woe is me, I am fainting before murderers. Alongside that imagery, there is also cosmic imagery. Perhaps the purpose of this imagery is to humble a nation that worships celestial bodies.

We encounter similar imagery elsewhere in the book, in chapter 34 verse 4 for instance. All the host of heaven shall rot away, and the skies roll up like a scroll. All their host shall fall, as leaves fall from the vine, like leaves falling from the fig tree.

We also find it in other prophets such as Ezekiel chapter 32 verses 7 to 8. When I blot you out, I will cover the heavens and make their stars dark. I will cover the sun with a cloud, and the moon shall not give its light. All the bright lights of heaven will I make dark over you, and put darkness on your land, declares the Lord God.

They would also be scattered and pursued, as like a beast before the hunter. Children would be dashed to their death, wives would be raped, and houses would be plundered. The Psalmist might be referring to this in Psalm 137 verses 8 to 9. O daughter of Babylon, doomed to be destroyed, blessed shall he be who repays you with what you have done to us.

Blessed shall he be who takes your little ones and dashes them against the rock. As I have already noted, the reference to the Medes in verse 17 here would seem to fit a 6th century referent, far more than it would a referent at the end of the 8th or beginning of the 7th century. Many commentators see problems with the claim that the Medes conquered the Babylonian Empire in the 6th century, arguing rather that it was the Persians.

However, where scripture elsewhere refers to this, it tends to reference the Medes particularly. This is most clearly seen in the character of Darius the Mede in the Book of Daniel, but also in Jeremiah chapter 51 verse 11. Sharpen the arrows, take up the shields.

The Lord has stirred up the spirit of the kings of the Medes, because his purpose concerning Babylon is to destroy it. For that is the vengeance of the Lord, the vengeance for his temple. Earlier chapters of Isaiah spoke about the judgment coming upon Judah and Jerusalem, referring to the total and final judgment upon Sodom and Gomorrah in the process.

In chapter 5 verse 17 it spoke of nomads eating among the ruins of the rich in the land, and the way that the land would be returned to the state of wilderness. The judgment that Babylon would face would be far more severe and final. It would not even be a place for nomadic herdsmen.

It would be a place filled with the eerie shrieks and cries of night time animals, a city

utterly desolate and humiliated. We find a similar account in Isaiah chapter 34 verses 10 to 15. There the prophet speaks of Edom.

Night and day it shall not be quenched, its smoke shall go up forever. From generation to generation it shall lie waste, none shall pass through it forever and ever. As human habitation is cut off, the city reverts to a place for wild beasts.

All of this is a sign of the severity and finality of the Lord's judgment. A question to consider. Where in the New Testament do we see the symbolism of this chapter being used? In what ways could the judgment upon Babylon described here be understood as archetypal in character? Isaiah chapter 14 continues the prophet's burden against Babylon.

As in the case of the preceding chapter, we need to consider whether this relates to Babylon at some period during Isaiah's own day, or to the Babylon of the 6th century. In Isaiah's day Babylon was defeated around 729 BC by Tiglath-Pileser III, who assumed the title of King of Babylon, although he did not annex Babylonia under Assyria. When Sargon II revolted against Shalmaneser V, his brother and Tiglath-Pileser's successor, Babylon rebelled against Assyrian rule.

Under Meredack-Baladan, Babylon gained independence of Assyria and Sargon II. In 710 BC, Sargon successfully overcame Babylon's rebellion and ruled from Babylon for five years, placing Babylonia under more direct Assyrian rule. There was a further rebellion by Meredack-Baladan in 703 BC, around the time that he fomented Judah's rebellion against Assyria too, King Hezekiah looking to Babylon for help against the Assyrians.

Assyria regained control of Babylon shortly after, but lost it to another Chaldean ruler around 691 BC. After a nine-month siege, Zennekerib overthrew and sacked Babylon in 689 BC, levelling and then flooding the city, a significant step marking the failure of earlier Assyrian attempts at conciliation. Babylon was a proud centre of Mesopotamian culture and trade, but it would soon be brought down.

It could serve both as a symbol of the pride of Assyria and its kings, who governed it at various times and in various manners, and a symbol of its own pride as a rebellious part of the Assyrian Empire, and the most serious threat to the Empire itself. Judah was tempted to ally itself with Babylon in this way, and the humbling of Babylon would represent a caution to Judah and its kings. They should not look to Babylon for salvation, but only to the Lord.

This would of course be a very important message to the Judah of Isaiah's own day. Readings that treat Babylon in Isaiah chapters 13 and 14 as the Babylon of Isaiah's day, have the strong advantage of relieving the problems associated with the prophet Isaiah addressing a political situation quite distant and different from that of his immediate context, problems that will be felt much more keenly in the latter parts of the book. It



also would allow us to situate the prophecy before 710 BC and the death of King Ahaz, mentioned in verse 28 of this chapter.

However, we might be left wondering why the Babylon of Meredak-Baladan would merit such prominent treatment in the prophecies concerning the nations, especially in contrast to Assyria which was the more dominant power. Others are unconvinced of attempts to account for the prominent role supposedly played by the Medes in the prophesied downfall of Babylon. Seth Olanson emphasises the fact that after Tiglath-Pileser III, Assyrian kings claimed the throne and the title of the King of Babylon.

He makes the case that despite the address to Babylon and its king, it is principally Assyria that is in view in these verses. This, he argues, explains why Assyria suddenly comes to the foreground in verses 24-27. It has been central throughout, but it has been treated in terms of Babylon and its king, given the immense cultural, economic and political significance of Babylon in the Assyrian Empire, the Assyrian kings' claiming of the proud title of the King of Babylon, and the symbolic and theological importance of the memory of Babel that Babylon represented.

Olanson and others see it as appropriate to represent Assyria and its rulers in such a manner. Such a prophecy would naturally assume a new significance with the rise of the Neo-Babylonian Empire under Nebuchadnezzar at the end of the 7th century, about 100 years later. Gary Smith raises the possibility that there is a telescopic presentation of the downfall of Babylon that could include both its destruction in 689 BC and the final cutting off of its power in 539 BC.

At various points we get glimpses of a much further eschatological horizon in such prophecies. The import of such a message, delivered toward the end of the 8th century, would be a warning against dependence upon the power of Babylon. Only trust in the Lord would provide a reliable basis for Judah's survival.

The theories of Olanson and others are not without their problems, however, and many commentators believe that these prophecies only make sense referred to the later Babylon of the end of the 7th and throughout most of the 6th century. The chapter begins with a statement of the reversal of Israel's fortunes and the return of its captives. The Assyrian king Sennacherib claimed to take 200,150 people captive in his campaign against Judah, in which he also overthrew 46 cities.

We might also see an anticipation of the later return of captives under Cyrus' decree here. Israel, according to this prophecy, would again be marked out as the chosen people of the Lord. Israel's captives would be returned to their place by the peoples.

Former captives would be placed under their rule and foreigners would join Israel, something already foretold in places like chapter 2 verses 1-4. These prophecies seem to await a greater salvation than any of the partial realizations of their promises in Isaiah's

nearer future would offer. We might also hear some recollections of Exodus here, with deliverance from slavery, the joining of foreigners to Israel, the downfall of a great adversary and the Lord's granting of rest to his people from their labours.

In verses 4-21 we have a poetic taunt over Babylon's king. The king here may not be a particular king, but a more general symbol of Babylon's power and sovereignty. The king is described as a fierce and cruel oppressor, a description that has strengthened the case of those who identify him with the Assyrian king and what John Oswald describes as their reign through terror.

The humbling of the power of the oppressor gives rest to those who have suffered under his mighty blows. The earlier chapters of Isaiah offer us several instances of the imagery of the felling of trees as a picture of judgement falling upon land. In chapter 2 verses 12-13 for instance.

For the Lord of hosts has a day against all that is proud and lofty, against all that is lifted up, and it shall be brought low, against all the cedars of Lebanon, lofty and lifted up, and against all the oaks of Bashan. Trees were symbols of powerful people and rulers. Tyrannical powers also fell great forests for their military and other projects, and as manifestations of their dominance, devastating lands that they conquered.

The earth is released from the power of the oppressor, but the underworld rises up to meet him. Former kings and powerful men welcome him to their now impotent company, all of his pride and might now brought to naught, laid to rest in the earth, with the maggots and worms as his living covering. The descent of the king was from the very heights of the heavens.

He was a man who fancied himself as one of the gods, a great luminary and power over the world of his day. He is compared to the morning star, possibly to be understood as the planet Venus. Many commentators seek to identify the description here with a particular myth, typically of a lesser deity trying to usurp the throne of a higher god.

There are important differences between these myths and the account of the proud man here, although it is possible that Isaiah was playing with some of their motifs. Perhaps the Mount of Assembly in the far reaches of the north, for instance, is a mythological reference to Mount Zaphon, the mountain of the gods equivalent to Mount Olympus in some Canaanite mythology. This arrogant ruler believed that he could make himself like God, raising his throne above that of God.

We might see a parallel here with the story of Babel. This is a man who, as it were, wants to be a human tower to heaven. The figure here has often been popularly associated with Satan, who is called Lucifer on the basis of it.

But there is no reason to believe that Satan is being referred to here, even though such

tyrants might appropriately be viewed as reflecting his character as the great dragon behind all tyrants. We have a similar lament over the king of Tyre in chapter 28 of the book of Ezekiel. There could be no more pronounced contrast between the ruler's hubristic ambition to rise to the heights of heaven and the depths of his fall to the lowest parts of the abyss of the grave.

Down in Sheol, the magnitude of the dread and destruction that he once exerted upon the earth is barely conceivable in the light of his humiliation and the utter stripping of his once terrible powers. He is described as one who has fallen ignominiously in a losing battle, not being given the honours of a royal burial, like others in the company of the fallen kings. This dishonour corresponds to the wickedness of his behaviour during his life.

Even his own people would not rally to recover him and honour him in his death. The name of his house will be extinguished to ensure that none of his descendants came to exercise power in the likeness of their evil father. The Lord seals the fate of Babylon in language that recalls that of the end of the preceding chapter in verses 19-22.

And Babylon, the glory of kingdoms, the splendour and pomp of the Chaldeans, will be like Sodom and Gomorrah when God overthrew them. It will never be inhabited or lived in for all generations. No Arab will pitch his tent there.

No shepherds will make their flocks lie down there. But wild animals will lie down there, and their houses will be full of howling creatures. Their ostriches will dwell, and their wild goats will dance.

Hyenas will cry in its towers and jackals in the pleasant palaces. Its time is close at hand, and its days will not be prolonged. Both the king of Babylon and his city will be brought to nothing.

The place of the oracle against Assyria in verses 24-27 raises questions about the relationship between it and the preceding material that fosters upon Babylon. Given the temptation of looking to Babylon for assistance against Assyria, perhaps the point of the prophecy here is to show that the Lord will bring down Assyria by his own means, and that Judah ought not to try to achieve this by an imprudent alliance with Babylon. The prophecy of the Lord's breaking of the Assyrian in his land might refer to Sennacherib's failure to take Jerusalem in 701 BC.

We read in chapter 37 verses 36-37, And the angel of the Lord went out and struck down 185,000 in the camp of the Assyrians. And when people arose early in the morning, behold, these were all dead bodies. Then Sennacherib king of Assyria departed and returned home and lived at Nineveh.

The Lord's declaration of the downfall of Assyria repeats prophecies from earlier in the

book, for instance in chapter 10 verse 27, And in that day his burden will depart from your shoulder, and his yoke from your neck, and the yoke will be broken because of the fat. The Lord is the God over all of the nations, the master of history, and his purpose would stand for Assyria and for all of the other nations. His people needed to learn not to fear the nations and to look to them for their salvation, but to look to the Lord alone instead.

At the end of chapter 14 we move into material concerning neighboring nations to Judah. If Babylon wasn't able to help, Philistia, Moab, Syria and others might be looked to for aid against the Assyrian threat. The prophecy was delivered in the year of the death of King Ahaz.

Historically this has led many to believe that the rod that struck Philistia that was broken, in verse 29, is a reference to the rod of Judah and its Davidic kings, perhaps especially Ahaz. However during his reign the Philistines were more of a threat to Ahaz than he was to them. Considering this many have seen this as a reference to the perceived removal or withdrawal of the Assyrian threat following the death of Shalmaneser and the rise of Sargon II.

However that seeming reprieve would be short lived. Under later kings such as Sennacherib and Esarhaddon, far from being broken, Assyrian power would rise to new heights. This account would help to make sense of the threat coming from the north in verse 31.

These verses contrast the security of Judah as the flock of the Lord in Zion and the insecurity that Philistia will experience. Perhaps we should see this as a promise that if Philistia would join themselves to Judah, they too could know the Lord's gift of aid and security in their distress. A question to consider.

David Dorsey has argued that there are contrasts between the king of Babylon described in this chapter and the suffering servant in the later part of Isaiah. What possible contrasts can you see between these figures? Isaiah chapters 13 and 14 contained oracles or prophecies against Babylon, Assyria and Philistia. The historical context for the prophecy against Philistia was given as the time of the death of king Ahaz, likely sometime toward the end of the 710s BC.

However, the context of the prophecy against Babylon is debated, as it seems to relate to a situation where Babylon was a, or the, primary centre of power in the wider world. This does not neatly seem to fit a late 8th century context, a period of Assyrian hegemony. Babylon was a centre of commerce, culture and power, and the kings of Assyria after Tigilath-Pileser III were kings of Babylon too, Babylon continuing to enjoy a high status for much of the period, not merely being annexed into Assyria.

While there have been some strong arguments made in favour of a late 8th century

setting for the prophecy against Babylon in the preceding chapters, neither these arguments, nor the arguments for a 6th century context, seem to resolve all of the questions that the content of the prophecy raises. One possibility is that it is a telescoped prophecy, relating both to the sacking of Babylon by the Assyrians in 689 BC, and the much more distant horizon of the defeat of Babylon in 539 BC by Cyrus and the Medo-Persian Empire. Babylon might be foregrounded on account of the temptation faced by Judah to look to Babylon and its anti-Assyrian alliance.

In chapters 15-16 we have an oracle against Moab. Once again, the precise historical context of the oracle is unclear, although chapters 16-14 speak of the fulfilment of a previously delivered word of judgement concerning Moab within three years. Considering this, some commentators claim that the Moab material might be traditional material relating to a time that has passed.

Christopher Seitz suggests that traditional material may have been recontextualised, now related to the disaster about to befall Moab at the hands of the Babylonian Empire. This, however, would be about a hundred years after the time of Uzzar. Other commentators, such as Alec Mottier, contextualise the material within the broader Assyrian crisis, which came through Sargon II in 715 and 711 BC, and then later through Sennacherib in 701 BC.

We need not assume that the prophecies and oracles against the nations in this section of Uzzar are arranged chronologically. It is entirely possible that they are ordered by a different principle. A further complicating factor here is the similarity between some of the material concerning Moab in these chapters, especially chapter 16, and material concerning Moab in Jeremiah chapter 48.

When reading such scriptural prophecies, where the specificity of dates, contexts and other particulars are difficult to ascertain – even the enemy of Moab in view here is vague – we ought to bear in mind that scriptural prophecy very commonly abstracts from the specifics of situations to help us to recognise deeper and recurring principles that are in operation, principles that are of perennial or frequent importance. In such a manner, rather than losing ourselves in reconstructions of the original historical context, we can recognise the primary canonical purpose of such prophecies in acquainting us with deeper principles that pervade history, helping us to draw relevant insights for our own times from words of the Lord to 8th century kingdoms. Moab was a transjordanian nation, situated largely on a plateau to the east of the Dead Sea.

Most of its territory was between the Zered Brook and the Arnon River. Its capital was likely Ker, although there is not unanimity among scholars on that matter. Moab was descended from Lot, Abraham's nephew.

Their ancestor was born of the incestuous relations between Lot and his oldest daughter after the destruction of Sodom. As a near neighbour, Judah had many interactions with

Moab over the years. Israel had passed through Moab's territory on their journey to the Promised Land, and Reuben and Gad had taken possession of land to the north of Moab in the Transjordan from the defeated Amorite kings, Sihon and Og, who had dispossessed Moab of that territory.

Moses had died in the land of Moab and saw the Promised Land from the top of Mount Nebo. Most notably, Ruth, the ancestress of David, was a Moabiteess. While fleeing from King Saul, David had sent his parents to Moab for refuge.

At several points in their history, Moab was at war with Israel or Judah. In 2 Samuel 8 verses 1-2, we learn that they were defeated during the reign of David and made to pay tribute to Israel. However, King Mesha later secured Moab's independence from Israel and dispossessed Reuben after the death of Ahab.

Our knowledge of Moab and its history is limited, much of it coming from non-Moabite sources, although there are some important archaeological confirmations of certain aspects of the biblical record concerning it. The chapter presents us with a litany of Moabite places, from major cities and regions to smaller towns, with the disasters about to befall them. Jeremiah chapter 48 has some similar passages concerning Moab, especially in verses 1-5.

We know where some of these places were. Some, such as Dibon, Heshbon, Eliela, Jehaz and Neba were former territories of Reuben and Gad, most of them mentioned in Numbers chapter 32, where Reuben and Gad requested to be given their possessions in the Transjordan. Reuben and Gad has subsequently lost these territories to Moab.

The prophecy describes a devastation descending upon the land of Moab, extinguishing city after city, with the people of Moab going into mourning as a result of their distress and the great loss of life. They go up to their temple and their high places to call for divine intervention in their crisis. Everyone, even Moab's warriors, are crying out in grief and despair, powerless to arrest the disaster that is ravaging their land.

In verse 5, the Lord himself joins in the mourning, recognizing the horrific suffering of the nation. Even as he is striking them, his heart mourns for them. Their flight to Zoar is, of course, ominously reminiscent of the flight of their forefather Lot from the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, when he too fled to Zoar, although he did not find secure enough refuge there.

As Gary Smith observes, however, the refugees' flight to Zoar might suggest that they are aiming to flee southwards to Judah or Edom, from an enemy coming upon them from the north. The disaster striking the people of Moab afflicts their land too. Waters are dried up or spoiled, grass withers, vegetation is destroyed.

The whole nation wails in their collective distress, their cry being heard from all of their

borders. Even as the waters of Dibon are full of blood, the disaster will not be stayed. Matthias suggests that this might be intended as an allusion back to the mirage of waters of blood that Moab saw in 2 Kings 3, verses 22-23.

Even after all of this suffering, there is still more to come. A lion, presumably a fierce predatory nation, will be brought upon them by the Lord. A question to consider.

Where in the book of Numbers do we find prophecies of destruction upon Moab? Azar chapter 15 contained a lament for Moab, Judah's neighbour, a nation situated largely to the east of the Dead Sea. Moab was the son of Lot's eldest daughter, through her incestuous relations with her father. Her sister bore Ammon, the forefather of the Ammonites, through relations with Lot too.

Toward the end of the lament of the preceding chapter, Moabites were fleeing to Zoar, much as Lot and his family had done at the time of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. It is likely that some of the Moabites were intending to take refuge in Judah. The opening five verses of this chapter are challenging to understand, and various lines of interpretation have been followed by different commentators.

They seem to relate back to the description of refugees from Moab in the preceding chapter, whether or not there is a strong literary connection between the two sections or not. However, it is unclear whether these are the words of Moabite refugees appealing for asylum, or whether they are the words of Zion, exhorting Judah to make room for the refugees from Moab. An important associated question is whether we should read the section that follows as the response to the opening five verses, or as a more independent section or oracle.

If the opening section is the message of Moabite refugees, and the verses that follow are Judah's response, it might seem as though the Moabites' appeal for shelter is denied. Beyond this, there is the question of whether seemingly sincere messianic sentiments such as those of verse 5 are conceivable in the mouth of Moabites. My inclination is to take the opening section as the words of the Moabites, and the section that follows as a more general reflection upon the situation facing Moab.

This would give the opening five verses a more hopeful flavour. Read this way, Moab is sending messengers to Zion, describing their desperate plight and begging for asylum. They are a scattered and vulnerable remnant at the river crossing on the borders of their land, and also sending a message from a foreign land, if Selah is in Edom.

Alternatively, Selah might refer to one of Moab's own strongholds, a place to which they had retreated. Comparing themselves to birds whose nest had been destroyed, they beg Judah to take them in and to show compassion for them in their time of crisis. The Moabites are presented as expressing confidence in the Lord's promise to establish the throne of David and peace through the reign of the Messiah, something that has already

been referred to at several junctures in the book to this point.

These could be read as words that the Lord or the Prophet is putting in the mouths of the Moabites, presenting their appeal for sanctuary in an idealised way, suggesting that this is a way in which the Lord's promise of bringing the nations to Zion might be fulfilled in part. Zion and its Davidic king can be a site of sanctuary for the nations in their distress, a beacon of hope and righteousness to the needy and the oppressed of the nations. In such a manner the Lord would fulfil some of the promise of chapter 2 verses 1 to 4. Verses 6 to 12 should, I believe, be read as a broader reflection upon Moab's pride and its downfall, although some, such as Christopher Seitz, argue that this should be understood as a rejection of the earlier request of Moab for asylum.

If this is the case, then we would probably need to read the earlier statements of the Moabites concerning the Davidic Messiah as insincere flattery. I don't believe that this is persuasive as a reading. A consistent theme in Isaiah to this point has been the Lord's humbling of the pride of the peoples, and Moab's pride is well known.

The nation of Moab is compared to a spreading vine. The vine of Moab spread throughout its land and beyond its borders, but now its branches are being cut off. With the cutting off of the nation's vine, its fruitfulness is being denied and the joy of harvest is being removed.

Instead of the joyful cries of the harvesters and those treading out the wine in the presses, the nation is filled with mourning. Once again the Lord himself mourns for Moab, even as Moab, in its idolatrous worship, finds that its prayers and its sacrifices are offered in vain. We should recognize the extensive similarities between this passage and the prophecy concerning Moab in Jeremiah chapter 48, which also uses material from the book of Numbers.

These similarities are especially noticeable in verses 29 to 36. We have heard of the pride of Moab. He is very proud of his loftiness, his pride, and his arrogance, and the haughtiness of his heart.

I know his insolence, declares the Lord. His boasts are false, his deeds are false. Therefore I wail for Moab.

I cry out for all Moab. For the men of Kir Haraseth I mourn. More than for Jazar I weep for you, O vine of Sivmer.

Your branches passed over the sea, reached to the sea of Jazar. On your summer fruits and your grapes the destroyer has fallen. Gladness and joy have been taken away from the fruitful land of Moab.

I have made the wine cease from the wine presses. No one treads them with shouts of joy. The shouting is not the shout of joy.



From the outcry at Heshbon, even to Elielah, as far as Jehaz, they utter their voice. From Zoar to Horonaim and Eglash to Shalishia. For the waters of Nimrim also have become desolate.

And I will bring to an end in Moab, declares the Lord, him who offers sacrifice in the high place and makes offerings to his God. Therefore my heart moans for Moab like a flute. And my heart moans like a flute for the men of Kir Haraseth.

Therefore the riches they gained have perished. In the commonalities between Jeremiah's material and the material from this chapter in Isaiah, perhaps we have evidence of a common tradition that lies behind both of them. This evidence is the way in which words of prophecy could be moved from one context to another.

Words addressed to Moab at the end of the 8th century, for instance, could also be applied to Moab in the early 6th century. At the end of this chapter, however, words of more general judgment concerning Moab are applied to a very specific time scale. Whether or not he did so through the prophet Isaiah, the Lord had previously spoken these words concerning Moab.

Now, however, within a period of three years, the Lord would bring a signal destruction upon the nation of Moab. A question to consider, why might a Davidic kingdom receiving refugees from Moab be particularly appropriate? From oracles concerning Babylon, Assyria, Philistia and Moab, the last two being the near neighbors of Judah, in Isaiah chapter 17, Syria and Israel come into view. These prophecies presumably relate to a time prior to some of the earlier ones.

The prophecy concerning Philistia in chapter 14, for instance, came in the year of Ahaz's death. However, the prophecies in this chapter seem to relate to the time of the Syro-Ephraimite war. In the concluding years of the 730s BC, Syria and Israel joined together to attack the southern kingdom of Judah.

Hoping to remove support for Assyria to their south, they wanted to establish a secure anti-Assyrian alliance, planning to install a puppet king, the son of Tebiel, on the throne of Judah to join them. This crisis provided the backdrop for most of chapters 5 to 12 of the book of Isaiah. There, the Lord called King Ahaz to trust him, promising that Pekah, the son of Ramaliah of Israel and Rezan of Syria, would be cut off.

Ahaz, however, turned to Assyria and ended up entangling himself in a dangerous alliance, one which moved Judah further in the direction of idolatry and also played some part in precipitating the near destruction of Judah in 701 BC. The Syro-Ephraimite war was one that was devastating for the southern kingdom of Judah. In one day, for instance, as we read in 2 Chronicles chapter 28, the forces of Pekah, the son of Ramaliah of Israel, killed 120,000 of the men of Judah, their brothers.

However, after the Assyrians became involved, the situation rapidly changed. In 734 BC, Tiglath-Pileser III of Assyria cut off the support of Egypt to the anti-Assyrian alliance. He then attacked Israel, taking significant portions of its territory, and then later defeated Damascus in 732 BC.

In 722 BC, Samaria and the northern kingdom would fall to the forces of Shalmaneser V and his successor Sargon II. The oracle of chapter 17 of Isaiah is introduced as one that concerns Damascus, but it is the northern kingdom of Israel that is central in much of it, especially from verse 4 onwards. Within that section, we see three in-that-day oracles that chiefly concern the nation of Israel, in verses 4-6, 7-8 and verse 9. Damascus and the Arameans, or the Syrians, are the force supporting Pekah and the northern kingdom, and the pairing of Damascus and Israel is ominous.

Israel is going to be judged along with the foreign nation with which it has allied itself. As John Oswald observes, Damascus was one of the most strategically located cities within the ancient world. The Lord placed the people of Israel at a juncture between different parts of the world, between Africa to the southwest, Europe to the northwest, and Asia to their east.

The city of Damascus was on a key point on the pathway that would have led from Mesopotamia to Egypt, a route that would have led through the territories of Israel and Judah. The Lord declares the coming destruction of this city of Damascus. It would cease to be a city, destroyed in a siege by Shalmaneser V in 732 BC.

Both of the powers to the north that had threatened Judah would be brought low and humbled. They would be stripped of their might. The fortress would disappear from Ephraim and the kingdom from Damascus.

Kingdoms that had once been fat would be left thin and emaciated. Nations that were once like fields golden with grain have been thoroughly harvested, leaving only the most meager gleanings. They are also compared to olive trees, beaten so that all but a few of the olives have been collected, those few olives remaining on the most inaccessible boughs.

Some of the remnant of Israel would, however, respond in an appropriate manner to this national humiliation. They would recognize the futility of their idols. Asherah was understood as the goddess who was the consort of the god El, or alternatively Baal.

Associated with cultic poles, trees, and groves, she was a goddess of fertility. And yet the remnant of Israel, because they had rejected the Lord, was experiencing not fertility but futility in their labors within the land. For all of their work in planting, their harvest was lacking.

They had forgotten the god of their salvation and not remembered the rock of their

refuge. The language of rock here might recall the similar language that we see in Deuteronomy chapter 32, in verses 15 to 18 of that chapter for instance. But Shoshurim grew fat and kicked.

You grew fat, stout, and sleek. Then he forsook God who made him, and scoffed at the rock of his salvation. They stirred him to jealousy with strange gods.

With abominations they provoked him to anger. They sacrificed to demons that were no gods, to gods they had never known, to new gods that had come recently, whom your fathers had never dreaded. You were unmindful of the rock that bore you, and you forgot the god who gave you birth.

Commentators debate whether the final three verses of this chapter, verses 12 to 14, should be connected primarily with the rest of chapter 17, or with verses 1 to 7 of the chapter that follows. It describes an invading force, in much the same language as we see in chapter 8, verses 6 to 8. The king of Assyria and all his glory, and it will rise over all its channels, and go over all its banks, and it will sweep on into Judah. It will overflow and pass on, reaching even to the neck, and its outspread wings will fill the breadth of your land, O Emmanuel.

Yet what seems to be an unstoppable force of water that's coming to deluge the land, turns out to be chaff on the mountains that's blown away before the wind. A force presumed to be irresistible is quickly dissipated. The description of a vast invading force that is removed in a single night seems to match the description of what happens to Sennacherib's horde in Isaiah chapter 37, verses 36 to 37.

A question to consider. In this chapter we see one of the earlier expressions of a theme that is very important in the book of Isaiah, the humbling of the false gods and the idols. What are some other places in the Old Testament where we see this theme expressed? In Isaiah chapters 18 to 20, the prophecies concerning the nations move on to consider the nations to the further south, Egypt and Kush, which would include modern day Ethiopia or Sudan.

As Christopher Seitz notes, this section is unusual in treating Egypt and the land to its south separately, in chapters 18 and 19, and then together in chapter 20. Kush was one of the people groups mentioned in the list of the nations in Genesis chapter 10. The kingdom of Kush was to the south of Egypt.

We don't have many references to it in scripture. During the reign of King Asa, a Kushite named Zerah had invaded Judah with an immense army, an event recorded in 2 Chronicles chapter 14, verses 9 to 15. On that occasion the Lord had delivered his people.

The Kushite kingdom, centered upon the city of Napata, attacked upper Egypt under

Kashta in the middle of the 8th century. His successors, Piankei and Shebaka, eventually brought the entirety of Egypt under Kushite rule, establishing the 25th dynasty. In contrast to the messages to the nations that preceded it, Chapter 18 is not introduced as an oracle, but as a woe, much as we see in verses 12 to 14 of the preceding chapter.

The land is described as a land of whirring wings that is beyond the rivers of Kush. Some have understood the word translated whirring wings in the ESV as a reference to the sort of vessels that the Kushites used upon the river. Elsewhere we see this word used in reference to the locust or some other insect in Deuteronomy chapter 28 verse 42.

This, it seems to me, is the more likely meaning of the term here. However, the Septuagint and the Targon both understand the term to be in reference to ships, so that reading does have a long pedigree. The Kushites are described as sending ambassadors by the sea in vessels of papyrus.

These vessels would have been used to navigate the Nile. If they stuck close to the shore, they could also have been used for a sea journey towards Judah. The business of these ambassadors is debated.

Was this part of a plan for an anti-Assyrian rebellion? Later on in chapter 31, for instance, the Lord will declare the futility of those who go down to Egypt for help. Brother Charles, for instance, proposes that we understand this chapter in the context of Hezekiah's attempts to build such an alliance against the Assyrians. Alec Machia relates it to earlier events, as the newly established 25th dynasty under Piankhi itself engaged in diplomatic efforts to form an anti-Assyrian conglomeration of nations.

This might make more sense for the fact that at the beginning of verse 2, it seems to be Kush that initiates the diplomatic exchange. The question of the identity of the swift messengers in the second part of verse 2, and their design destination is one that divides the commentators. Are these the same messengers as have been mentioned in the first part of verse 2? However, if the messengers that have been sent from Kush are being sent back to Kush, it is odd that they are not simply told to return.

The description of the people to whom they are sent, a nation that is tall and smooth, is repeated in verse 7. Some commentators see a parallel with this and chapter 45, verse 14. Yet the description of the men of stature there is not so clearly related to Kush as it is within these verses. Furthermore, as there is no reference to them being smooth or hairless, the parallel may not be as strong as many people think.

A people feared near and far, a nation mighty and conquering, does not seem to fit Kush that well. Some have seen this then as a reference to Assyria. Alternatively, as Joseph Blenkinsop suggests, this might be a more sarcastic way of speaking about the people of Kush.

He sees the envoys here not as Kushite being sent back, but as Judeans being sent to Kush. The message that is delivered does not seem to relate to Kush more directly. Rather, it is a message delivered to the whole world, speaking about what the Lord will do.

The raised signal might draw our minds back to Isaiah chapter 13, verse 2, at the very beginning of the section concerning the nations. On a bare hill, raise a signal, cry aloud to them, wave the hand for them to enter the gates of the nobles. The object of the Lord's judgement is also a matter of debate.

If we read it alongside verses 12 to 14 of the preceding chapter, as Gary Smith notes, it would make most sense to relate it to the Assyrians. God is enthroned above all the events of the earth. His throne is in no way unsettled.

He looks down calmly upon the things that are taking place. At the appropriate time, he will act decisively against his enemies. If verses 5 to 6 are in reference to the Assyrians, the word would have been fulfilled with the cutting back of Sennacherib's army, as the Lord prevented Sennacherib from taking over Jerusalem in 701 BC.

This would be a message of hope to both Judah and Kush. Much as the Lord described cutting back the vine of Moab, the spreading vine of Assyria would also be cut back. And as the Lord cut off from this vine, the pieces would be left for the birds of prey of the mountains and the beasts of the earth.

The end of verse 6 might be a reference to birds of prey and beasts of the earth making their home in the ruins of a former city. Alternatively, we might think of the birds of prey feeding upon the 185,000 that were dead of the Assyrians when the Lord slew them at their unsuccessful siege of Jerusalem. The short chapter is bracketed by another reference to the people tall and smooth, feared near and far, the nation mighty and conquering, whose land the rivers divide.

In Uzziah chapter 2 verses 2 to 4, we read the following prophecy. The chapter ends with a prophecy that this time will come for Kush too. They will bring tribute to the Lord of hosts, to Mount Zion.

Nations that were worried about paying tribute to the cruel Assyria would one day pay tribute to the Lord, the righteous and good ruler of all of the earth. A question to consider, in the context of the reign of King Hezekiah and the insecurities of Judah during that period, what lesson might they have taken from this prophecy? Uzziah chapters 18 to 20 concern Kush and Egypt. Chapter 18 addressed Kush and in chapter 19 we turn to Egypt.

As Assyria rose to dominance in the region, Judah was tempted to look south to Egypt for support against the great threat that Assyria posed. In chapters 30 and 31, this

temptation will be dealt with more directly. Although dating this material is difficult, it is probable that the same concern underlies chapters 18 to 20, which also demonstrate the unreliability of Kush and Egypt as nations to rely upon.

Some have suggested that we should connect the opening part of this chapter with the situation described in the preceding chapter, presumably referring to Kush taking over Upper and Lower Egypt and the foundation of the Kushite or Nubian ruled 25th dynasty. However, much of the material of this chapter has a more figurative character to it. Egypt is, of course, prominent in the story of Israel.

In Genesis chapter 12, Abraham had gone down into Egypt during a famine. Later on in the book of Genesis, Joseph was sent down into Egypt by his brothers in chapter 37. Later, his brothers and family joined him.

There they settled in the land of Goshen, came to thrive, and then later, as they were persecuted under Pharaohs who did not know Joseph, the Lord delivered them in the Exodus. Sending great plagues upon the Egyptians and drowning the pursuing Egyptians in the Red Sea. While the northern powers relative to Israel and Judah were places like Assyria, Babylon, and Persia, the Egyptians were the great power to the south and consequently often needed to be prominent in the consideration of Israel and Judah's foreign policies.

Presumably seeing it as a shrewd political maneuver, Solomon had married the daughter of Pharaoh. He had engaged in horse trading for Pharaoh within the region, something that the kings had been told not to do. However, despite this marriage alliance, Pharaoh had sheltered some of Solomon's enemies, Hadad the Edomite and Jeroboam the son of Nebat.

After Solomon's death, the kingdom divided, in part because Solomon had taken on something of the character of a Pharaoh. His adversary, Jeroboam the son of Nebat, who had taken refuge in Egypt, returned to the land and took away the northern tribes from the rule of the house of David. A few years after the division of the kingdom, Shishak the king of Egypt came up and attacked Jerusalem, plundering the treasures of the temple.

While Egypt was not the same power that it once was during much of the period of the kingdoms, it did play an important role in the destiny of the kingdoms at some critical junctures. Hoshea, the last king of Israel before its fall, had turned to Egypt for aid against the Assyrians. The Assyrians' vengeance for this led to the final destruction of the northern kingdom in 722 BC.

During the reign of Hezekiah, Judah was also tempted to look to Egypt for aid against the rising Assyrian threat. Another pivotal event in which Egypt was involved in the history of the southern kingdom came about a century later, when Pharaoh Necho, coming up to engage with the Assyrians, killed King Jeziel, who was the last great hope for the nation.

He later removed King Jehoahaz, whom the people of Judah had set up as a replacement for his father, and put Eliakim, who he renamed Jehoiakim, in his place.

He ruled as a vassal under Egypt. The Babylonians would soon crush the influence of the Egyptians within the region, driving them back within the borders of their land. After the fall of Jerusalem and the assassination of the governor Gedoliah, many Jews fled to Egypt for refuge.

As we read of individual Israelites who fled to Egypt for refuge, people like Jeroboam the son of Nebat, perhaps there were some small established communities of Israelites within the land of Egypt earlier on. The Jews who moved down at the time of Jeremiah were not going to thrive in the land of their exile. Later communities of Jewish exiles, however, would.

During the 5th and 4th centuries, there was a large Jewish community at Elphantine, who even built their own temple, although they seemed to have been polytheists in their practice, and to have little or no knowledge of the law. Under Alexander and the Ptolemies, further communities of Jews would be established in Egypt. At one point, over a third of the population of Alexandria was Jewish.

They had a temple at Leontopolis, and also translated the scriptures from Hebrew into Greek in the Septuagint in the 3rd century. Estimates of the population of Jews in Egypt by the 1st century AD can be as high as 1 million. Considering the way that Isaiah chapter 19 speaks about the future of Egypt and the intertwining of its destiny with that of Israel, this history is important to consider.

The chapter begins with the announcement of the Lord's advent. He is riding the storm cloud, common theophanic imagery, coming to Egypt to judge the idols. The Lord's war against the false gods should be familiar from the background of the Exodus.

The Egyptians' confidence would have been in their gods, their internal unity, the natural provision of the Nile, and the wisdom of their leaders. In this chapter, the Lord speaks of how he is going to frustrate all of these sources of strength. Their idols and false gods will be dismayed.

Their warriors will be sapped of courage. The nation would turn against itself. They would be subject to the harsh bondage of another nation.

Their river would dry up, and all of the food that it offered and the industry that it supported would be removed with it, and the counsel of all of their wise men would be frustrated and proven foolish. Egypt was a place of idolatry and superstition, and the Lord is going to judge the necromancers, the mediums, the idols, and the sorcerers. There is a sort of poetic justice to the way that the Egyptians would be given into the hand of a hard master.

They had once been the hard master over Israel, but now they would be subject to harsh rule. Verses 5-10 with the various judgments upon the land should recall the plagues of the Exodus. The Nile was the great source of Egypt's life.

Without the Nile, Egypt would disappear. It would become entirely desert. Whether in Upper Egypt to the south with the Nile Valley, or in the Lower Egyptian area of the Nile Delta, Egypt was entirely dependent upon the Nile for its existence.

There would no longer be any fish for the fishermen. Those working with cotton and flax would no longer have the plants with which to make the clothes that they would sell. The vast fields of grain that were supported by the Nile, which would later make Egypt the breadbasket of Rome, would be parched and barren.

Egypt's life and economy would be utterly devastated. This passage is likely figurative, not a literal description of the Nile drying up, but of the Lord bringing the great and proud kingdom of Egypt down to the ground. This would be a great caution to those in Judah who attempted to trust in her.

Besides the internal unity, the gods, and the superstitions of Egypt, and the natural situation by the Nile, the Egyptians placed great faith in the wisdom of their rulers and their counsellors. The Lord, however, would frustrate these two, leaving them without any wisdom. The princes of Zohan, the key city in the north, and the wisest counsellors of Pharaoh would be incapable of giving good advice.

The same would be the case for the princes of Memphis, another key northern city. In a familiar prophetic image, we are told that Egypt would be made drunk. They would stagger and reel under the Lord's judgment.

No one in Egypt, from the greatest to the least of them, would be capable of responding to the crisis. The chapter ends, in verses 16-25, with five in-that-day oracles, the last four of which continue and bring to a higher expression the theme that we have already encountered of the bringing in of the nations after judgment. We saw this in places like Azar, chapter 18, verse 7, for instance.

At that time, tribute will be brought to the Lord of hosts from a people tall and smooth, from a people feared near and far, a nation mighty and conquering, whose land the rivers divide, to Mount Zion, the place of the name of the Lord of hosts. The first of the in-that-day statements, however, is a statement of judgment. If Egypt is going to be purified, it will be purified, like Judah, through judgment.

Egypt would be struck with terror, a terror caused by the land of Judah. The Egyptians, of course, had responded to the Israelites in this way during the period of the plagues and the exodus. This prophecy does not seem to have been literally fulfilled during the years that followed Isaiah.



It seems to be looking forward to a more eschatological situation, a situation connected to other such prophecies within the book of Isaiah. There were many cities in the land of Egypt, but the prophecy of verse 18 is that five of these cities would be so associated with Israel as to speak Hebrew. One of these five cities is singled out.

Many translations read it, the city of destruction, but it's likely that it should be read the city of the sun, identifying the city as Heliopolis. What was once a center of worship for the pagan sun god Ra would become a Hebrew-speaking city for the worship of the Lord, just as Abraham had set up altars and pillars in the land of his wanderings in Canaan. So an altar would be set up in the midst of Egypt and a pillar at its border.

Much as Israel had once called out to the Lord in their distress in Egypt, so the Egyptians would now be able to call out to the Lord because of their oppressors, and he would send them a savior, the term for savior here perhaps being a play upon the name Moses. The Lord would deal with the Egyptians as his people. They would worship him, would sacrifice in offerings and would make vows to him, and he would strike them and heal them.

Much as Judah, they would return to the Lord through judgment. Isaiah chapter 11 verse 16 read, Verses 23 to 25 describe a much more remarkable highway, a highway that will lead all the way from Egypt to Assyria, bringing the northern power of Assyria, the southern power of Egypt and Israel in the center, together in the common activity of worshipping the Lord. John Goldingay speculates that perhaps the Lord chose Canaan as the site for his special people precisely because it is so suited for such a highway.

It is the place that stands at the junction of Africa, Asia and Europe. If you are looking for a location from which something can spread out into the rest of the world, the land of Canaan is the ideal place to start. This would be a fulfillment of the promise of the Lord that he would bless all of the nations through Abraham.

The Lord speaks of Egypt and Assyria in language that is similar to that of which he speaks of Israel. Israel, the Lord's firstborn son, would be joined by other sons. All of this fulfills the promise of Isaiah chapter 2 verses 2 to 3. For out of Zion shall go forth the law and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.

He shall judge between the nations and shall decide disputes for many peoples, and they shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nations shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more. The Lord would bring judgment upon Egypt, but judgment would not be the final word.

A question to consider. What are some of the former ways in which the Lord blessed Egypt through his people and some of the former indications that God had a good purpose for them as a nation? Isaiah chapters 18 to 20 concern the great powers to Judah's south, Cush and Egypt. In the preceding chapters the two nations were treated

separately, Cush in chapter 18 and Egypt in chapter 19.

In chapter 20 they are treated together. Judah was tempted, especially with the rising power of Assyria, which had overthrown the northern kingdom of Israel by this point, to look towards Egypt and Cush as potential sources of aid. Hoshea, the last king of Israel, had looked to Egyptian forces for aid earlier in the rebellion against Assyria.

During much of this period Egypt was divided under various rulers. However, after the rise of the Nubian rule 25th dynasty of Egypt, under Kashta, Pianchi and their successors, the Cushites would go on to secure rule over the entirety of Egypt. Forces from some ruler within Egypt had supported Gaza and Hemath in their rebellion against the Assyrians around 720 BC.

However, Sargon II of Assyria had crushed the rebellion and defeated the Egyptian forces supporting them. Perhaps he didn't retaliate against Egypt at that point because the forces were from a more limited regional power in a much divided Egypt. Ashdod was a key port on the coastal plain of Palestine belonging to Philistia.

The Assyrians wanted to control the sea ports and the regions around them as the ports were critical for trade. When an anti-Assyrian faction under Yamani gained power there, ousting an Assyrian appointed ruler in 713 BC, Ashdod looked to Egypt for support. They do not seem to have received the support that they hoped for when the Assyrians came to crush the rebellion and Yamani fled.

Like many others before him, people like Hadad the Edomite and Jeroboam the son of Nebat, he fled for refuge to Egypt. However, on this occasion the Egyptians extradited him to the Assyrians in 711 BC when they were threatened by them. The Nubian 25th dynasty seemed to have a more conciliatory foreign policy towards Assyria during this period.

Nevertheless, a decade later they would support Judah in their rebellion against the Assyrians. The Assyrians under Esau Haddan invaded Egypt in 674 BC but were defeated by the Egyptians under Taharqa. The Egyptians weren't so successful in repelling the invasion of 671 BC and the Assyrians ended up taking lower Egypt, the northern part of the country, and imposing tribute.

After some Egyptian gains, Ashurbanipal extended Assyrian power down as far as Thebes by 656 BC. The whole country was united under a vassal of the Assyrian Ashurbanipal and the 25th dynasty was at an end. This is all background for the short 20th chapter of Isaiah, presumably set in 711 BC, the year of the recapture of Ashdod by the Assyrians.

The prophet Isaiah was instructed to perform a prophetic sign act. There are several instances of such sign acts in the books of the prophets. Jeremiah performs a number, so

does Ezekiel, and Hosea, in one of the most famous sign acts of all, takes the unfaithful Goma as his wife.

Isaiah is instructed to dress, or rather undress, as if he were a captive taken in war. Isaiah at this time was wearing sackcloth, presumably in mourning for some reason. But he was instructed to remove the sackcloth and the sandals from his feet and walk around naked and barefoot.

It is not clear whether he was entirely naked or whether he was merely removing all of his outer garments. Either way, it would have been a humiliating sight. Egypt had not been directly involved in the rebellion of Ashdod and they had extradited the rebel Yemeni to the Assyrians.

Perhaps part of the lesson of Ashdod in this context is that Ashdod was greatly unwise in expecting any aid from the Egyptians. This lesson would be particularly important in the years that followed, in the final years of the 8th century, as the Egyptians played a part in fomenting rebellion in the region. The Assyrian Sennacherib would crush the Egyptian expedition at that time.

In the years to come, as we have already seen, the Assyrians would drive back the Egyptians. They would subdue them and reduce Egypt to the status of a vassal kingdom. The people of the coastland, people who had looked to Egypt from Philistia for many years as their greatest source of support, would be dismayed.

There was no help to be found in Egypt and Kursh. Once again, the message of the prophet is that there is no security to be found in such human alliances. Even supposedly great powers would prove utterly insufficient.

Judah would have to learn to depend upon the Lord God of hosts for their support or else it would not survive at all. A question to consider, what might be the symbolic import of the nakedness of the prophet Isaiah in this prophetic sign act? At the beginning of the oracles concerning the nations in chapters 13 and 14, there was a lengthy oracle concerning Babylon which seems surprising in the context. Isaiah's ministry occurred during a period of Assyrian dominance in the region.

Earlier in the period, in the late 730s BC, Israel and the Arameans were rebelling against Assyria, attacking Judah to bring it into their anti-Assyrian alliance under a puppet king. King Ahaz appealed to Assyria for aid and Assyria subdued Damascus, cut off support from Egypt and took territory from Israel. Judah ended up in a far closer relationship with Assyria, one that was deeply compromising, both spiritually and politically.

In 722 BC, after rebelling against Assyria again, Shalmaneser V came up against Samaria, which fell either to him or to his successor Sargon II. Isaiah's oracles against the nations largely seemed to belong to the period following this and leading up until the

end of the 8th century when, in 701 BC, Assyria under Sennacherib would come up against Jerusalem and King Hezekiah. This, however, raises challenging questions for us when we try to understand the prominence of Babylon in these prophecies and the seemingly minimal attention given to Assyria by contrast.

Babylon didn't become the dominant power in the region until 100 years later. The Neo-Assyrian Empire began to crumble from around 630 BC after the death of Ashurbanipal, suffering a period of civil wars and rebellions by former vassal states. In particular, the Medes and the Babylonians escaped Assyrian rule and turned against their former suzerain.

Assur was taken in 614 BC, Nineveh in 612, in 609 they lost the Battle of Haran, after which they were no longer a state. In 605 BC, at Carchemish, the Egyptians, with the remnants of the Assyrian army, were decisively defeated by Nebuchadnezzar, after which the Neo-Babylonian Empire was the unrivalled power in the region. The Babylonian Empire would last until 539 BC, when Babylon fell to Cyrus the Great.

All of this was a very long time off when Isaiah delivered his prophecies, yet the later chapters of Isaiah speak concerning this period, and these chapters of Isaiah have also long been read by people of various theological persuasions as also speaking concerning these more distant events. Under Merodach-Baladan, Babylon had rebelled against Assyria following the death of Shalmaneser V in 722 BC. He had reigned over an independent Babylon until 710 BC, when Sargon II overcame that rebellion and reigned from Babylon for a number of years.

In 703 BC, Merodach-Baladan led another short-lived rebellion, during which time he seemed to have encouraged Hezekiah in his rebellion against Assyria. Sennacherib recovered Assyria's control of Babylon after nine months in 702 BC, but the Assyrians would again lose control of the city in 691 BC. In 689, after a nine-month siege, Sennacherib captured and sacked Babylon, flattening and flooding the city.

The destruction of Babylon in 689 was unprecedented and would not even be repeated in 539 BC, when Cyrus took over the city without it being destroyed. Destroying Babylon would be like destroying a great historic city like Rome, Paris or London. Even though such cities are not the centres of imperial power that they once were, there are few finer cities in the world, and people from all over the globe travel to and admire them for their history, culture, wealth and grandeur.

Even though it was not the centre of the great world empire of the time, Babylon was such a city in the day of Assyria, treated with reverence even by the foreign powers that ruled over it. Something of this reverence is seen in the fact that the Assyrian kings also claimed the throne and title of the king of Babylon, rather than simply removing its royal status. Sargon II even ruled his empire from there when he needed to consolidate his power in the region.

Babylon would also have a similar importance in the time of Alexander the Great. Destroying such a glorious city was nearly unthinkable. Commentators take various approaches to handling the material concerning Babylon in these earlier chapters of Isaiah.

John Oswald describes the way that the most common datings of the material of chapter 21 has shifted over the years. The rise of belief in the deuter-Isaiah hypothesis, which attributed chapters 40-55 of the book to a later period and author, writing at the end of the exile around 539 BC, originally made a later dating of this material popular. However, this reverted back to the time of Isaiah himself at the end of the 19th century.

The oracle was referred to the defeats of Babylon in 710 and 702 BC and its sacking in 689 BC. John Goldengate contrasts the oracle concerning Babylon in this chapter with that of chapters 13 and 14, suggesting that it is much more what we would expect of an oracle concerning Babylon in Isaiah's own day, mixed in with the other nations, rather than at their head and given particular prominence. The balance of scholarly judgement has shifted back again to the later dating of the 6th century, although Oswald notes that commentators are increasingly adopting positions that allow for both horizons to be in view.

There are different ways in which this could be approached. For some commentators, like Oswald himself, it seems plausible to see both references to the defeat of Babylon in the 8th and early 7th centuries on the near horizon and dark foreshadowings of a more distant horizon of Babylon's destiny in 539 BC. For others, earlier prophecies were remixed and elaborated by later hands to address situations current in their own later days.

Andrew McIntosh, for instance, has made a case that Isaiah chapter 21 is a palimpsest, a prophecy concerning an earlier situation that has been recycled and reworked for a later time. This position has been persuasive for many, but it seems to me it is not necessary to read the chapter in that way. The oracle begins in a mysterious manner, being introduced as the oracle concerning the wilderness of the sea.

We should note that the following chapter begins in a similar fashion, the oracle concerning the valley of vision, perhaps suggesting that the two ought to be read together. If the reference to the wilderness of the sea is not a textual corruption as some suggest, then we might take this to be a description, likely unflattering, of the marshy land of southern Babylon. Described in such a manner, it is certainly not auspicious as a source of aid.

The evocative yet elusive description of the whirlwind from the wilderness has been understood by some to refer not to the subject matter of the vision, but to the vision itself. The unsettling vision descends upon Isaiah like a storm. Elam and Media are called to go up against their adversary.

These details would seem to fit a 6th century reference well, Elam and Media being the Medes and the Persians who overthrew Babylon in 539 BC. Elam and Media were allies of Babylon during the earlier period of the late 8th and early 7th centuries. However, Oswald questions whether this summons needs to be read as a literal prediction.

Isaiah, he suggests, could be painting a more general picture of Babylon's destruction, rather than making a claim about the exact form that it would take. He could also be read as calling upon Babylon's allies to turn against it. This earlier dating is strengthened by Isaiah's reaction to the prophecy.

He is greatly dismayed by the news of Babylon's coming downfall. In sharp contrast to the rejoicing over Babylon's downfall that characterises later prophecy concerned with the exile period. This would make a lot more sense of a situation where Judah was looking to Babylon for its rebellion against Assyria.

The crushing of Babylon would be devastating news for Judah and the prophet is deeply dismayed by the vision. Christopher cites raises a further possibility that Isaiah is dismayed, much as Daniel is described as being dismayed, when he sees visions of events that are very distant in time. Such a reaction is described of Daniel in places like Daniel 7, 15, 28 and 8, 27.

Isaiah sees troubling and obscure visions, but cannot make sense of them. Readers of Isaiah have long seen in verse 5 a possible reference to Belshazzar's feast at the eve of the fall of Babylon. The banquet is prepared and enjoyed, but the enemy has come upon them and they are quite unready.

However, one could also understand the people at the feast to be the enemies of Babylon, who prepare for battle after their banquet. Alec Matia has even suggested that the meal may have been the meal that Hezekiah prepared for the Babylonian ambassadors in chapter 39. The prophet is described as a watchman, much as Habakkuk in Habakkuk 2, verse 1. I will take my stand at my watchpost, and station myself on the tower, and look out to see what he will say to me, and what I will answer concerning my complaint.

As the divinely appointed watchman, Isaiah is instructed to declare what he sees, speaking out when he sees a procession of horsemen, riders on camels, and riders on donkeys approaching. The watchman, told what to look out for, perseveres in scanning the horizon day and night. Eventually, the riders and the horsemen appear.

These are the evidence of Babylon's doom. Babylon is fallen, and its gods with it. The prophet then addresses the people of Judah as the threshed and winnowed one, presumably referring to the fate that awaits them at the hands of the Assyrians, without any Babylonian aid to support them.

They will be trampled underfoot and beaten, much as grain on the threshing floor. The object of the oracle of verses 11 and 12 is difficult to ascertain. Historically, the reference to Seir led people to identify it as referring to Edom.

Duma may be related to Idumaea. Alternatively, Duma was one of the sons of Ishmael, along with Kedar and Tima, who are both mentioned in the following oracle. Dedan, who is also mentioned in verse 13, was one of the grandsons of Abraham by Keturah.

The identification of Duma with Ishmael and the Arabian allies of Babylon seems to be the more likely identification. Duma was an oasis in northern Arabia. The trade route through Duma would be important for the Edomites, who would be eagerly awaiting news.

The prophetic watchman is asked what time of the night it is. Is there going to be a new dawn soon? The watchman's response is equivocal though. Morning is coming, but so is night, and the inquirer is encouraged to come back again when things are clearer.

The Arabians were important allies of the Babylonians, and Nabonidus even ruled from Tima when he left Babylon in 552 BC. In verses 13-17, however, we have an oracle concerning Arabia, with refugees from the north fleeing from the sword, coming into their desert land, as Kedar is stripped of its glory. Much as Judah was encouraged to take in Moabite refugees, the Arabians of that region are encouraged to take in their brothers who have fled from the sword.

A question to consider. The prophet's involvement in the reception of the word of the Lord is pronounced in this chapter. The vision comes upon him like a whirlwind and sets him trembling.

Later he is described like a watchman, sleeplessly scanning the horizon. Where else in scripture do we find such images of the intensity of the prophet's relationship with the word of the Lord? The oracle with which Isaiah chapter 22 opens most likely relates to the invasion and siege of Jerusalem in 701 BC by Sennacherib and the Assyrians, during the reign of King Hezekiah. Judah had rebelled against Assyria, turning to Egypt for support.

The Assyrians came up against Judah, inflicting heavy losses. Sennacherib's prism, on which his campaign against Judah is described, boasts that he destroyed 46 of Judah's cities. However, although it was besieged, Jerusalem was not one of these.

The Lord's routing of the Assyrian invaders at Jerusalem is described in chapter 37 verses 36-37. And the angel of the Lord went out and struck down 185,000 in the camp of the Assyrians. And when people arose early in the morning, behold, these were all dead bodies.

Then Sennacherib king of Assyria departed and returned home and lived at Nineveh.

Some have argued that, besides the reference to the events of 701 BC, the oracle also speaks to events of a later time, after the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians in 586 BC. They see this in such details as the reference to the destruction of the daughter of my people in verse 4 and to the battering down of walls in verse 5, which they argue fit far better with the events of 586 than those of 701 BC.

Some have even seen an extensive reworking of an earlier prophecy, one chiefly seen in verses 1-3 and 12-14, to relate to a later situation. For others, the prophecy has become dislodged from any specific historical events altogether. Brevier Charles, quite dissatisfied with such dehistoricisation of the prophecy, argues that the supposed tension between 701 and 586 references are greatly overstated.

He contends that the passage, in its canonical positioning, while historically grounded in the events of 701 BC, is clearly presented as foreshadowing the later events of 586. It is not some later editorial reworking and misappropriating of an earlier text, but rather, in Charles' words, the narrative structure of a canonical corpus that comprises a holistic, unified story of God's purpose in history for his chosen people. Recognition of the biblical text as scripture prepares the reader for the rich resonance that a holistic interpretation invokes, and functions without sacrificing the text's original historical mourning for a literary construct.

Indeed, this is not unrelated to the reasons why people over two and a half millennia after the time of Isaiah, and the events to which he immediately referred, can continue to read his prophecies and those of other prophets with great benefit. Although they have more immediate and specific reference and fulfilments, they also disclose deeper patterns and realities of the Lord's dealing with his people in the world. In chapter 21, there was a prophecy concerning Babylon, introduced as the oracle concerning the wilderness of the sea.

Chapter 22, a prophecy concerning Jerusalem, is introduced in a somewhat similar manner, as the oracle concerning the valley of vision. John Oswalt observes further similarities between these visions, including, in his words, the partying and lack of vision, the prophet's grief, the references to Elam, and the mention of a chariot of a man and horsemen. To these, he adds the fact that both of these prophecies seem to be operating on two different levels, referring to Babylon and Jerusalem in Isaiah's own time, but also to their later destinies in the 6th century.

The association of the two visions is possibly an indication of the intertwining of their destinies. In chapter 39, Isaiah would directly warn Hezekiah that, in throwing in his lot with Babylon, he was unwittingly allying himself with the very power that would one day destroy Jerusalem. Linking an oracle concerning Judah with oracles against the nations is also an ominous sign that Judah is bringing similar judgments upon itself.

The description concerning the valley of vision should probably be related to verse 5,



with its reference to a valley of that name. The opening verses of the oracle describe a chaotic and almost surreal scene of revelry, people on the housetops of Jerusalem celebrating, completely out of keeping with the severity of the city's situation. Verse 13 implies that they were aware of the fact that death was likely very imminent for them, so it may not be the case that they believed that they were delivered.

The cause of their celebrations may not have been the lifting or weakening of the siege, as many have presumed. Alternatively, if that were the case, they are not confident that it will hold. Gary Smith wonders whether, given the descriptions of the preparations for the siege in the context, the people were celebrating because the siege preparations were complete, and though they considered their hopes of survival low, they wanted to have a party before dying.

The prophet cannot share in these hollow celebrations. He is weeping and in mourning at the terrible state of his nation. Many of their leaders have fled, and according to Sennacherib, over 200,000 captives and 46 cities were taken from Judah at this time.

In the section beginning in verse 5, Azar describes a sort of day of the law that is coming upon the people of Judah and Jerusalem, a great reckoning as enemy forces surround them in the valleys around their city. The cities that formerly shielded Jerusalem have been overcome, and now Zion itself is surrounded. The references to Elam and Qerhiyah might refer to mercenary forces within the army of the Assyrians.

Faced with these surrounding forces, Jerusalem's response, even in its weakness, is to trust in its own strength. It looks to the weapons of the House of the Forest, one of the great buildings built by Solomon within the palace and temple complex. They collect waters from the reservoir and dig a tunnel to bring further waters into the city.

They demolish some of the houses of the city in order to strengthen the walls. However, in all of their efforts, they fail to look to the Lord, the one whose providence and purposes stand over all things. When they should have been weeping and calling out to the Lord, confessing their sins and repenting of their iniquities, they are rather found in engaging in feasting, trying to dull their awareness of the severity of their situation on the very eve of their potential deaths.

In a terrible statement with which this part of the oracle closes, the Lord declares that they will not be forgiven for this iniquity. In turning to wine and song, rather than turning to the Lord in the time of their distress, they had disclosed something of the true measure of their lack of spiritual concern. The more general attitude of the people was more specifically manifested in some of the key figures within the realm.

The prophet Isaiah is sent to see the steward Shebna. Shebna, a man over the administration of the household of the king, and presumably in charge of much of the preparation for the siege, is found in the process of cutting a fine tomb from the rock for

himself. Rather than turning to his maker, he seems to be more concerned to prepare for his death by ensuring that he will get a grand burial.

Shebna will not enjoy the burial that he hopes for. Instead, the Lord will hurl him away, casting him into exile in a foreign land. Stripped of his office, his role will be given to Eliakim the son of Hilkiah.

In chapter 36 verse 3, we read both of these figures again, and here Eliakim is described as being over the household and Shebna as being the secretary, which might suggest that the removal of Shebna from his office happened very soon after the prophecy was delivered. Eliakim's investiture is described in verses 20-24. Although the fate of the royal house of David has not been as prominent in this section concerning the prophecies and oracles against the nations, it was very prominent in earlier sections of the book of Isaiah.

As the newly appointed steward, much of the managing of the royal house would now fall into the hands of Eliakim. Possessing the key of the house of David, he would enjoy immense scope of authorisation to act in the name of the king, much as we see in the figure of Joseph in Genesis chapter 41 and following. He would be established by the Lord, and the whole of his household would be increased in its status and dignity on account of his office.

However, those given great status and blessings by the Lord should not presume upon their past gifts. There is good reason to suppose that Eliakim fell into this trap. In the final verse we learn that the Lord would remove the peg that was once secure, and with it, all that once hung upon it, Eliakim's house and its dignity, would fall to the ground.

A question to consider. In Matthew chapter 16 verse 19 and Revelation chapter 3 verse 7, the New Testament alludes back to this prophecy concerning Eliakim. How does it use this prophecy, and how can our understanding of this prophecy help us to understand these New Testament passages better? The series of oracles and prophecies concerning the nations that began in chapter 13 with the oracle concerning Babylon, ends in chapter 23 with an oracle concerning Tyre.

Babylon and Tyre were cities with international reputations and significance in the ancient world, global cities of their day. Even when they were not centres of imperial might, they remained places of immense wealth and trade, historical significance and cultural influence. If Babylon was more like the London, Paris or Rome of that day, Tyre might have been the Hong Kong, Singapore or Dubai.

Situated to the north of the region of Galilee on the Mediterranean coast at the south of modern day Lebanon, Tyre was one of the oldest cities in the world, founded around 2750 BC, taking its name from the island rock that it was built upon. Tyre was originally at the border of the territory given to Asher, although it does not seem that Asher ever

controlled the city. During the reigns of David and Solomon, Hiram of Tyre had a close relationship with Israel, providing wood and artisans for the building of the temple.

In exchange, Solomon had given Hiram 20 Galilean cities, although their relationship soured a bit as Hiram was not pleased with them. Commonly paired with Sidon, Tyre was the primary city of the maritime civilisation of the Phoenicians, who had lucrative trade routes throughout the Mediterranean and colonies at many points along the North African coast and in places like Cyprus, Sicily and Malta. Hiram had assisted Israel in developing its own sea trade at the height of the kingdom under Solomon.

Over a century later, Jezebel, the daughter of a king of Tyre, Ethbaal, married King Ahab of Israel. In addition to their fabulous wealth, they were a technologically advanced and skilled civilisation. The citadel of Tyre was originally built on an island just off the mainland, and since it was also well fortified, it was considered by many to be impregnable.

There was also a city on the mainland from which people could retreat to the island if ever under attack. It was only after the seven month construction of Causeway, constructed using the stones of the demolished mainland city of old Tyre, and the use of the largest ever siege towers used in warfare, that Alexander the Great was able to take the city in 332 BC. During the period of the Neo-Assyrian Empire, Tyre was a tributary of Assyria.

After the power of Assyria started to rise again in the region under Tiglath-Pileser III, the Assyrians tried to increase their control over the city. The Assyrians, during the reign of Shalmaneser V, had unsuccessfully besieged the city between 725 BC and 720 BC. Later it was also besieged by Sennacherib.

He did not succeed in taking Tyre, but Tyre lost its territories and their king had to flee. From that point, Tyre adopted a pro-Assyrian foreign policy and their king supported Assyria. Esau-Hadon and Ashurbanipal, who came after Sennacherib and ruled from 680-669 BC and 669-631 BC respectively, both overcame Tyre and destroyed its wider lands, even though they did not take the city itself.

It is most likely that this prophecy relates to the period just before Sennacherib came up against Jerusalem, around 701 BC. The 70 years of Tyre being forgotten mentioned in verse 15 probably refers to the period of tighter Assyrian dominance from that time until the death of Ashurbanipal in 631 BC, after which time the Neo-Assyrian Empire started to crumble. The oracle is framed as a lament over Tyre.

Some commentators regard this lament as satirical in character, although considering the fact that Jerusalem was probably hoping that Tyre would be able to help to stem the flow of Assyria in the region, the lament may well have been genuine. The failure of Tyre would have been very bad news for Hezekiah and the rulers of Judah. The oracle begins

by instructing the ships of Tarshish, large mercantile ships with sailors returning to Tyre from Spain, to wail as news that Tyre has fallen reaches them at or from Cyprus.

The merchants of Sidon, another great city of Tyre and the Phoenicians, are called to join in the mourning. As prosperous traders of Egyptian grain, the Phoenicians were at the heart of international commerce. Tyre was like the great child of the sea, but now the sea itself is bereft, robbed of its offspring.

News of Tyre's fall spreads throughout the Mediterranean. Egypt laments the cutting off of its commerce and trade, recognising that its own wealth will start to dry up. Tarshish and peoples in various Phoenician colonies throughout the Mediterranean will also mourn.

The once great and rich city of Tyre, which planted colonies all along the coasts, has been humbled. The prophet makes clear that Tyre was not the victim of mere happenstance. The Lord himself has determined to humble its pride, a recurring theme in the Book of Isaiah.

The Lord's purposes are over all of the affairs of man, and he alone is the exalted ruler. All others who would lift themselves up will be brought low. The meaning of verse 10 is difficult to ascertain.

It might refer to forsaking trading for farming. Perhaps the claim is that the power of Tyre has been brought low and its former colonies are no longer restrained and could plunder her. Or it may refer to the fact that they are no longer defended by her.

The Lord is the true master of Tyre's fate, has stretched out his hand over her seas, and will shake the earth and bring down Tyre's kingdom. They might flee to Cyprus, as their king historically did, but they will not find rest and security there. The Lord's hand through Assyria and other means will still hang over them.

Gary Smith suggests that verse 13 is instructing the people of Tyre to attend to the defeat of Meredack Baladan and the Babylonian rebellion against the Assyrians shortly before this, in 703 BC. Tyre's fate at the hands of the Assyrians would be similar. Christopher Seitz reads the verse very differently, as a claim that it was Babylon, not Assyria, that brought down Tyre, referring it to Babylon's siege of Tyre later on.

Verse 13 is a very obscure one. The section ends by returning to its opening summons to the ships of Tarshish to wail for Tyre. The main section of the oracle is followed by a secondary elaboration of its message.

Elsewhere, Jeremiah speaks of 70 years of Babylonian dominance in the region. The 70 years mentioned here is most likely not the same as that of Babylon's dominance. Rather, it might relate to the period of Assyrian dominance until the death of Ashurbanipal.

That said, we are probably justified in recognising the symmetry. Tyre would again be eclipsed during the period of Babylon's dominance. It is also possible that the 70 years mentioned here is more idiomatic than literal.

When the 70 years come to an end, Tyre would be revived and start trying to sell her wares once again as she formerly had. The prophet compares her to a forgotten and perhaps ageing prostitute who is returning to the streets and singing a song in hopes that people will remember her and that she might get some new custom. Earlier in the oracle, Tyre was described as the merchandise of nations.

In her extreme commitment to trade, she herself was being traded, so thoroughly was she entangled in her own economy. However, after the period of her suppression, Tyre would rise again. The Lord, verse 17 puts it, would visit her, language typically used of the Lord's redeeming of his own people.

Yet her deliverance would see her return to her prostitution with the nations of the world. Nevertheless, her wealth would end up flowing out of her to the Lord and to his people. This should be read along with other material in Isaiah speaking of the glorification of Jerusalem and the lifting up of Zion over the nations.

Tyre, once the greatest city of maritime trade, would bow to Jerusalem and Tyre's riches would flow up to Zion. A related prophecy can be seen in Isaiah chapter 60 verses 9-14. For the Lord your God and for the Holy One of Israel, because He has made you beautiful, foreigners shall build up your walls and their kings shall minister to you.

For in my wrath I struck you, but in my favor I have had mercy on you. Your gates shall be opened continually, day and night they shall not be shut, that people may bring to you the wealth of the nations, with their kings led in procession. For the nation and kingdom that will not serve you shall perish, those nations shall be utterly laid waste.

The glory of Lebanon shall come to you, the Cyprus, the plain and the pine, to beautify the place of my sanctuary, and I will make the place of my feet glorious. The sons of those who afflicted you shall come bending low to you, and all who despised you shall bow down at your feet. They shall call you the city of the Lord, the Zion of the Holy One of Israel.

As Cites and Brevi Charles observe, if Babylon was the greatest city of the earth, Tyre was the greatest city of the seas. Babylon is also the easternmost of the places judged, and Tyre the westernmost. Beginning the series of oracles against the nations with Babylon and ending it with Tyre suggests the comprehensive character of the judgment of the Lord that is coming upon the face of the earth.

A question to consider. How do we see Revelation combining the prophetic judgments upon Babylon and Tyre in its description of the judgment upon Babylon the Great? The

oracles concerning the nations in Isaiah chapters 13-23 started with an oracle against Babylon and ended with one against Tyre, pronouncing disaster upon nations and cities across the Near East. In chapters 24-27 we move from these specific oracles to a broader and more general statement of the Lord's judgment about to fall upon the earth.

While some have termed this Isaiah's apocalypse on account of the cosmic scope of the judgment declared, as John Oswald argues, it lacks many of the typical visionary and symbolic features of such apocalyptic literature, the sort of features more familiar from the book of Revelation, and is better understood as eschatological. The prophetic declarations about the Lord's judgments and acts of salvation coming upon the earth in these chapters are punctuated, as John Goldengay observes, with hymns responding to them, in which worshippers respond to the great deeds of the Lord. The material of these chapters does not provide clear indications of its historical context.

At the heart of these chapters, as Christopher Seitz observes, is a city of uncertain identity, mentioned in chapter 24 verse 10, chapter 25 verse 2, chapter 26 verse 5, and chapter 27 verse 10. Save for the city of which the men of Judah sing in chapter 26 verses 1-5, the references to a city are to a city that is judged or destroyed, yet no specific identifications are made. We are not told that the strong city of chapter 26 verse 2, for instance, is Jerusalem, or that the city to be destroyed is Babylon.

While these prophecies likely have an original historical occasion, a more immediate reference, the non-specific character of the references should probably serve as an indication that the point of the prophecy, in its canonical situation, is not primarily a particular historical judgment, but a more general statement about the Lord's comprehensive judgment upon the earth, one that should not be restricted merely to one time frame, but which nonetheless does have concrete historical references. Seitz, Brevard-Chiles, and many others relate the section chiefly to the time of Babylon and its downfall, but Gary Smith seems correct to emphasize the context where the actions of Assyria are more immediately in view. The entire world was indeed judged by the agency of Assyria, and would again be judged by means of the power of Babylon a century later.

The contrast between two cities is in some respects comparable to what we find in places like the end of the book of Revelation. Rather than seeking to identify the city to be destroyed with one particular city, it seems better in the light of the non-specificity of the text to recognize that many cities might be comprehended under its figure. Already we have seen Babylon and Tyre's significance as global cities of their day.

The city of these chapters could be seen as a unifying figure for man's power and hubris, manifested in many various cities in Isaiah's day and in ours. It is the archetypal opposition between the city of man and the city of God. Alec Mottier hears allusions back to key stories of early Genesis, the stories of the flood and Babel.

Verse 18 is one of the only places in scripture that references the windows of heaven

outside of the flood narrative, perhaps the greatest biblical account of cosmic judgment. Besides this he notes references to the everlasting covenant, themes of the vine connected with Noah's planting of vineyard, and reference to the curse. As in the flood there is a sort of cosmic de-creation occurring, in which the earth will revert to an empty and desolate state, much as it was prior to the original creation.

The scattering of the people and the bringing down of the city also recalls the story of Babel, the precursor of course to Babylon. The judgment upon the earth is imminent. The opening verse describes what the judgment of the Lord will affect, the emptying of the earth and the scattering of its people.

The judgment will be comprehensive, affecting people of all ranks and stations. Verse 2 presents a series of opposed pairs, the tails and the heads of society. No party will be immune.

A structured and ordered society will be flattened in undifferentiated judgment. The certainty of this judgment is founded in the certainty of the Lord's word. The Lord has declared it, so it will surely come to pass.

The prophecy assembles various sets of images of the disaster that will befall the earth. In verse 4 the disaster is compared to a dreadful drought that will cause everything to wither and languish. In verse 5 the image is one of pollution, as the iniquity of the people, breaking the law and the covenant, has made everything unclean.

In verse 6 the image shifts to a curse consuming the land like fire, burning its inhabitants and leaving little in its wake. It is the imagery of a vineyard, its harvest and the drinking of its wine that connects verses 7 to 13. Times of joy and celebration will become grim and sorrowful.

The jubilation of great festivals will be ended. Songs will be silenced. Pleasures will be soured.

The desolate city of verse 10 is described using a term familiar from Genesis 1.2's description of the formlessness and void of the earth. At the outset of the days of creation, the chaos and emptiness of the city is a de-creation. Its inhabitants have either departed, abandoning their former dwellings, or they have retreated from the chaos to the extent that they can behind closed doors.

As all joy and gladness flees from the devastated city, people call out for the wine and the feasts of the good times from which they have been firmly and finally banished. The situation will be similar to that after a harvest, where only a few scattered fruit could be found after the harvesters had gone through the fields. Only the smallest remnant would remain.

Verses 14 to 16 provide the first worshipful response to the just judgments of the Lord in

the eschatological prophecy that precedes it. People around the world are summoned to join in the praise, from west to east to proclaim the glory of the Lord, all the ends of the earth joining in. Perhaps we should understand these as the voices of the remnant leanings of all of the nations.

However, as Oswald suggests, the prophet might recognize that he will not know this great deliverance in his own days, which causes him to lament. His own time is one of treachery and the apparent triumphing of the wicked, all while the people of the Lord waste away. As at other points in this chapter, wordplay accents the prophet's claims.

The five concluding words of verse 16 are all forms of the same Hebrew root. The disaster awaiting the people of the earth is unavoidable. If they run from one of its forms, they will fall into another form of it, and even if they were to escape that, they would be trapped in a third.

It cannot be evaded. The very structure of creation is being shaken up. As in the flood, the windows of heaven are opened, and the foundations of the earth are shaken and tremble.

All that people would depend upon starts to give way under them. The whole earth sways and totters, disoriented and unstable, like a drunken man. The key expression, On that day, introduces the final statements of the chapter.

Once again underlining the comprehensive character of his judgment, the Lord presents the judgment as occurring against the rulers in heaven and the kings on the earth. The hosts of the heavens here are probably not merely stars as symbols of human rulers and powers, but angelic powers placed over the nations, whose rebellion is to be judged. We likely see such figures in references to powers like the Prince of Persia in the Book of Daniel.

Much as in the Book of Revelation, these powers are to be imprisoned, locked up in the pit of Sheol, awaiting a final judgment. This great demonstration of the Lord's universal rule and his supremacy over all rebellious powers will lead to the shining forth of his glory, utterly eclipsing the glory of either sun or moon. A question to consider, how might the general character of this chapter help us better to recognize commonalities between events such as Babel and the flood, to which it alludes, and other judgments upon the whole world order, such as that described in the Book of Revelation? Isaiah chapters 24-27 are an extended proclamation of the Lord's judgment upon the whole earth, punctuated by praise that responds to it.

While we can imagine some of these chapters being occasioned by the judgments upon the whole earth brought about through the Assyrians at the end of the 8th and beginning of the 7th centuries BC, it is general and non-specific in character, and one might just as well relate it to the later judgment upon the earth that came about through the



Babylonians a century later. The figures in this section seem to stand for broader realities. The two opposed cities of the section are perhaps best understood as relating to the city of man and the city of God, rather than simply to particular cities like Babylon or Jerusalem.

Even when specific places are referenced, like Moab in this chapter, we should probably see them as more exemplary, or representative of the nations more generally. Most importantly, within the more immediate horizons of the Lord's acts of judgment and redemption in history, the reader is invited to see a far greater final horizon prefigured, the time when the judgment and salvation of the Lord will be complete, death itself will be defeated, all enemies will be pacified, and the reign of the Lord spread throughout the world, his people triumphant and free, and worshippers from all nations gathered to the holy mountain. Chapter 25 is a chapter that speaks of cosmic restoration and renewal after the devastation and decreation described in chapter 24.

Punctuating the pronouncements of the Lord's judgment and salvation in these chapters are responsive declarations of praise, verses 1 to 5 of chapter 25 being an example of this. Chapter 12 provided a similar song of praise, responding to the material relating to the earlier crisis of the Syro-Ephraimite war. The language here is steeped in that of the Psalms and the scriptures more generally.

The opening lines of the song might recall the words of Moses' song after the deliverance at the Red Sea in Exodus chapter 15 verse 2. The Lord is my strength and my song, and he has become my salvation. This is my God, and I will praise him, my Father's God, and I will exalt him. Just as that song responded to the great deliverance and judgment at the Red Sea, so this song declares the Lord's greatness in the light of the judgment of the earth that he will bring about, much as the feast on the mountain that follows it might recall the covenant meal at Sinai in Exodus chapter 24.

The singer expresses his devotion to the Lord and his commitment to exalt the Lord's name, the God who has acted powerfully for his deliverance. He gives reasons for his praise, the mighty deeds of the Lord in accordance with his sure purposes of old. The Lord has declared his purposes and his judgments in advance, and he has brought them to pass.

The Lord rules over the affairs of men and all of the events of history. He is never taken by surprise, he is never wrong-footed. His plans are not only certain, but also plans in which his faithfulness to his covenant and his people are displayed.

A further reason for exalting the Lord is the fact that his judgments against his foes are decisive, and as the Lord displays his hand among the Gentiles, people of foreign nations fear and glorify his name, a common theme in the book of Isaiah. As the Lord's judgments go out to the nations, the Lord's salvation is also extended to them. The Lord is a God who is near to the poor, the needy, and all those in distress.

He is a refuge for those who are oppressed. He is like a fortress and a stronghold for them, one to whom they can flee for safety, but also a shade and a shelter against hostile elements. A furious blast of the cruel violence and oppression of the wicked against the weak and the vulnerable is quelled by the protection of the Lord, who is like the relief of the shade of a cloud on a burning hot day, or like a wall that shields people from the anger of a storm.

The previous chapter had described the failure of the vine harvest, the stilling of feasts, the cutting off of the wine, and the banishing of gladness from the people. Now, however, a bountiful banquet of wine is prepared for all of the nations. The mountain here, like the cities, isn't identified, although it is presumably the cosmic mountain to which all of the nations is assembled, to be identified with the mountain of Zion that is lifted up over all of the other mountains, described in places like chapter 2 verses 1-4.

It is a celebration of the Lord's kingship, albeit not a coronation as some have claimed. The feast is not exclusive to Israel, but is one to which all of the peoples are invited. After the dark storm clouds of cruel oppression, war, and mourning have been removed, that mountain will be a place for the breaking forth of joy and gladness.

Nothing less than the removal and swallowing up of death is in view. All hurts will be harmed, every tear wiped away, mourning, sorrow, and pain will be removed, and the disgrace of the Lord's oppressed people will be taken away. Once again, the certainty of this is founded upon the certainty of the Lord's word.

In the deliverance of Judah from the Assyrian crisis, and then later on in their return to the land after the fall of Babylon to the Medes and Persians, the mourning veil that would be associated with times of pestilence, famine, and war is removed as the nation does not suffer from the same untimely deaths. In such deliverances from mourning, the people of the Lord would have an anticipation of a greater deliverance yet to come, not merely a deliverance from times of war and disaster, but a more complete deliverance from death in all of its forms. In such a deliverance, the confidence of faithful people in the Lord would be vindicated.

They had trusted and hoped in him, and he had delivered them, and now they will rejoice in his salvation. The final three verses of the chapter describe a contrast between the mountain of the Lord, upon which the hand of the Lord rests in blessing and protection, and the near neighbor Moab, presumably symbolizing unfaithful nations, who will be brought low and humiliated. Moab will be akin to straw trampled down in dung.

Verse 11 describes Moab as akin to someone swimming to try to escape a cesspool, yet his efforts to escape will fail. His pride will be utterly humiliated. All of this is seen in the failure of Moab's cities and defenses, their fortifications brought down and crumbled to dust.

A question to consider. How can we relate the image of the defeat of death in this chapter with images of resurrection within the New Testament? As our chapter 26 continues the declaration of the Lord's eschatological judgment and renewal that runs from chapter 24 to chapter 27, once again there is the punctuation of statements of the Lord's great deeds with expressions of praise. Almost the entirety of this chapter is responsive in character, beginning with a psalm in verses 1-6 and continuing with a psalm in verses 7-18 or 19, addressing the people in their current situation.

The chapter concludes with the assurance that the Lord will act in his people's cause. These chapters contrast two cities, likely best understood as essentially the city of man and the city of God. The city of God or Zion was described as a place of festivity and security in the preceding chapter.

That chapter described a great banquet of wine being prepared for the peoples there and of the Lord's hand resting upon his mountain. Here the city's strength is identified with the Lord's deliverance that surrounds it, like walls or ramparts. The gates of the city are opened in order that the righteous might enter.

We might here think of faithful pilgrims ascending to Mount Zion for a feast. Entrance to the city is a mark of the Lord's approbation and acceptance of his people. The righteous person within this city, the one who trusts in the strength of the walls of the Lord's salvation that surrounds it, will know assurance of true security, freed from the fears that afflict those without.

The Lord's enduring might and steadfast faithfulness is comparable to a rock. He gives his people unwavering grounds upon which to trust him. Drawing our minds back to the preceding chapter, the song concludes by speaking of the fate of the rival city, the city of man.

That city, for all of its pride, has been utterly humbled and brought low. It is trampled underfoot by the poor and needy, those who were once oppressed within it and by it. The strength, security and hope of the righteous rests entirely in the Lord.

The verses that follow describe the dependence and the confidence that arises from this. Continuing to speak of people's steps, mentioned at the end of the song in verse 6, the prophet describes the path of the righteous in a way that characterises the path they choose as level, but also reveals that it is the Lord who makes it so. The level character of the path of the righteous likely refers to its moral integrity, but also to its safety, two related features.

Verse 8 implies that the levelness of the path corresponds to the judgments of the Lord that are upright, straight and certain. The judgments here likely refer chiefly to the Lord's judgments upon sin, not merely to his laws. In walking this path, the righteous confidently wait for the Lord and his judgments for their sake.

The righteous man desires the Lord himself above all other things, seeking the honour of the Lord's name, an honour that will be manifested in his great deeds of salvation and judgment before the nations. Where laws are well enforced and wickedness is speedily judged, evil persons are corrected and some repent, while the righteous are emboldened. The delay of the Lord's judgment is a complaint of the psalmist at various points, and also of Job.

Righteousness can be learnt through the judgments of the Lord in the land. Where punishment is delayed out of divine grace, granting the wicked time to repent, the wicked can actually often be hardened and made more brazen in their sins, fancying themselves immune to the Lord's justice. The prophet perceives the judgments of the Lord in the earth, but he is dismayed to see that the wicked do not, leaving them complacent in their sin.

He prays that the Lord would manifest his zeal for his people and their salvation, so that the wicked would realise the futility and shamefulness of their own ways. He prays that the Lord would consume the wicked in his judgment. The Lord's purposes for his people are consistent and good.

He seeks their peace. Indeed, all of the good that the Lord's people have ever achieved has been through the Lord's purpose and power. They were formerly under the dominion of foreign rulers, yet the Lord had consistently rescued his people from their clutches.

Only the Lord's throne endures, while his adversaries and those who once persecuted his people have been brought down to the grave, their pride condemned to the pit, erased from human memory. Nevertheless, the Lord's people have increased and prospered, even despite such cruel oppression. Though all seemed lost on several occasions, and enemies seemed mighty beyond any hope of defeat, the light of the Lord's people was never extinguished.

The next verse, verse 16, is difficult to translate and interpret. Perhaps its sense is that the trials of Israel's history drove them to the Lord, and as the Lord disciplined them, they came to seek his face. This is a dynamic that we witness in the book of Judges, for instance.

A common image for people and nations in distress in scripture is the woman in birth pangs. The struggle of the woman attempting to give birth is a governing metaphor in the story of the Exodus, for instance, where the story begins with Israel in birth pangs, seen in the pain of the Hebrew women who are robbed of their newborn sons, and in the courageous resistance to Pharaoh of the Hebrew midwives. That story reaches its climax as Israel is drawn out from the womb of Egypt through a narrow passage in the context of a focus on the firstborn and the opening of the womb.

Yet the experience of Israel's history has often felt like recurring pangs without any birth.

One can imagine, for instance, the experience of Isaiah's own lifetime, the experience of two deliverances from the point of the nation being overthrown, the first during the Syro-Ephraimite war in the 730s BC, and the second Jerusalem's deliverance from the Assyrian invasion in 701 BC. Both of these experiences had been horrific and had involved an immense loss of life.

But what had Israel achieved through them? Assyria was still in power in the region, Judah was still weak and suffering and persecuted, and there had been no great revival of the people. The prophet has been awaiting and has prophesied a miraculous national rebirth and renewal, and with each increase of pangs he likely hoped that the time for it had come, but it didn't materialise. Commentators differ over who is the speaker in verse 19.

It seems most likely to me that the speaker is the Lord himself, answering the disheartened prophet. The Lord would one day raise his people to life. The previous chapter described the defeat of death, and here we have an image of resurrection.

Those now in the grave would be lifted up and would sing with joy. There would be a national resurrection, much as the one described in Ezekiel chapter 37, in the vision of the Valley of Dry Bones. We could see such a national resurrection in the metaphorical raising of Israel from the grave of exile.

We might also relate this to King Hezekiah himself, who was on the brink of death but was healed by the Lord. However, this passage does not merely deal with metaphor. It anticipates the final defeat of death and the awakening of the dead to new life.

The earth is related to the womb on several occasions in scripture, and here we are told that the earth would give birth to the dead. The tomb would no longer be barren, but would be like an opened womb, with new life proceeding out from it. Nevertheless, in the meantime, prior to that final deliverance and resurrection, the Lord's people will have to shelter themselves from the Lord's wrath and that of their enemies.

We might recall the account of the Passover here, where the people did not leave their houses while the Lord judged Egypt and killed their firstborn. The sin of Egypt was exposed in that judgment, their sin in killing the children of the Lord's firstborn, Israel. Much as the blood of the baby boys thrown into the Nile called out for the Lord's vengeance, so the blood of the slain upon the earth in Isaiah's day would be disclosed, and the Lord would act against the wicked.

A question to consider. What are some of the ways that the confidence of final resurrection can help us in the midst of crisis? In Isaiah chapter 27, we arrive at the end of the section that began in chapter 24, prophecies of the judgment upon and renewal of the earth, of the downfall of the wicked city and the establishment of the city of the righteous, of the defeat of death and the enemies of the Lord, and of the raising up of his

people. Within these chapters, prophecy has been frequently punctuated with praise.

While the oracles concerning the nations that preceded this section foretold judgments upon specific nations and cities, especially around 701 BC, this section has been more cosmic and general in its scope, presenting a more eschatological and archetypal vision of judgment and renewal for the cities of man and God respectively. The figure of the sea monster Leviathan appears on several occasions in scripture, along with related figures such as Rahab. In places like Job chapter 3 verse 8, it is clearly more than merely a regular sea creature.

It is a chaos monster of the deep, representing and personifying the forces of chaos and evil in the world. In the Baal cycle, Lotan is a serpent dragon of the abyss with seven heads, defeated by Baal-Hadad. The Babylonian cosmogonic myth described Marjuk slaying the sea monster Tiamat.

Leviathan recalls the great serpent, the dragon who is identified with Satan himself. The sea monster is a figure that represents his terrifying might and destructive purpose, the powers of death, destruction, evil and disorder. His defeat is the end of the dominion of chaos and evil, and allows for the establishment and securing of a new cosmic order.

For instance, in Job chapter 26 verses 5 to 13, the dead tremble under the waters and their inhabitants. Sheol is naked before God, and Abaddon has no covering. He stretches out the north over the void, and hangs the earth on nothing.

He binds up the waters in his thick clouds, and the cloud is not split open under them. He covers the face of the full moon, and spreads over it his cloud. He has inscribed a circle on the face of the waters at the boundary between light and darkness.

The pillars of heaven tremble, and are astounded at his rebuke. By his power he stilled the sea. By his understanding he shattered Rahab.

By his wind the heavens were made fair. His hand pierced the fleeing serpent. Later in Isaiah chapter 51 verses 9 and 10, Awake, awake, put on strength, O arm of the Lord.

Awake, as in days of old, the generations of long ago. Was it not you who cut Rahab in pieces, who pierced the dragon? Was it not you who dried up the sea, the waters of the great deep, who made the depths of the sea a way for the redeemed to pass over? At various points in scripture, Leviathan and other chaos monsters are associated with tyrannical rulers, as the great dragon Satan is manifested in the evil human powers that he establishes and empowers. The defeat of Pharaoh and the Egyptians at the Red Sea, for instance, is a symbol and manifestation of the Lord's greater dominion over the powers of evil represented by the sea monster Leviathan.

Psalms 74 verses 12 to 14 Yet God my King is from of old, working salvation in the midst of the earth. You divided the sea by your might. You broke the heads of the sea

monsters on the waters.

You crushed the heads of Leviathan. You gave him as food for the creatures of the wilderness. In such places we see mythological language being used to depict the Lord's dominion over evil and disorder in history, and the power by which he establishes a secure and habitable world under his rule.

In Job chapters 40 and 41, the Lord describes Behemoth and Leviathan and his power over them to Job. These two chaos monsters represent the forces of death and evil that have been overwhelming Job. However, the Lord is the master over both of them, and neither can escape his control or thwart his good purposes.

In the beginning of Azar chapter 27, the prophet describes the Lord's victory using such mythological imagery of the archetypal monster of chaos. In Revelation chapter 12 verse 9, John speaks of that same defeat. And the great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent who is called the devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world.

While there are human oppressors and evil powers, the great awaited victory of the Lord will involve the crushing of the power of death and the devil, and this victory is described in this section of Isaiah. The proper placing of verse 1 is a matter of debate among commentators. Many argue that the chapter break is poorly placed, with verse 1 belonging with the material that precedes it in chapter 26, or that the material from chapter 26 verse 20 to the end of chapter 27 should be treated as a unit.

Others believe that it is an independent in that day saying. The rest of the chapter describes the glory of the vineyard of the Lord, the destruction of the enemies of his people, and the return of the exiles of Israel. In Isaiah chapter 5 verses 1 to 7, Israel was spoken of as a devastated vineyard.

Let me sing for my beloved my love song concerning his vineyard. My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill. He dug it and cleared it of stones and planted it with choice vines.

He built a watchtower in the midst of it and hewed out a wine vat in it, and he looked for it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes. And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem and men of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard. What more was there to do for my vineyard that I have not done in it? When I looked for it to yield grapes, why did it yield wild grapes? And now I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard.

I will remove its hedge, and it shall be devoured. I will break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down. I will make it a waste, it shall not be pruned or hoed, and briars and thorns shall grow up.

I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain upon it. For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah are his pleasant planting. And he

looked for justice, but behold bloodshed, for righteousness, but behold an outcry.

In chapter 26 verses 2 to 6 we have a new song concerning the vineyard of the Lord. However, the contrast is stark. The vineyard that once bore only bad fruit, and was broken down, overrun, and abandoned to the wilderness, is now described as a pleasant, fruitful, and well-kept vineyard.

Having passed through judgment and come out the other side, the once rejected vineyard has now been restored. We should probably connect this song of the vineyard with earlier parts of this section of Isaiah, which spoke of the Lord's banquet of rich wine on his holy mountain, and the victory songs of his people. The Lord himself is the one who guards and tends this vineyard.

It is his own good planting, which he waters and watches over. The Lord's anger against the iniquity of his people has been assuaged. Indeed, the Lord so cares for his formerly abandoned vineyard, that in verse 4, he expresses a wish that there were thorns and briars within it that he could fight against, merely in order to demonstrate his loving care for it.

In Joshua and elsewhere, the children of Israel were warned that, if they were not faithful in driving out the idolatrous peoples from the land, those peoples would remain in the land like thorns in their sides. However, in verse 5, the Lord describes an even better outcome, that the thorns and briars, the enemies of his people, would themselves turn to him, make peace with him, and find security under his protection. The restoration of the Lord's vineyard would involve the fruitfulness and expansion of the nation, but this expansion and fruitfulness would have ramifications for the whole world.

The entire world would be filled with Israel's fruit. Verses 7-11 are difficult ones to interpret and understand at points. However, they seem to concern the fate of Israel relative to that of their enemies.

While the Lord's judgment against the enemies of his people had been decisive and final, his judgments against Israel were not, and Israel would be purified through and restored after them. His judgments upon Israel had been carefully apportioned, so that they would not ultimately destroy them. Exile wasn't simply an abandonment, but a communicative act of judgment, by which Israel was supposed to learn the ways of the Lord and repent.

As the Lord punished his people, he was disciplining them as a father disciplines his wayward son. Through punishment, repentance, and on the basis of divine grace, Israel would know atonement for its sin. The restored people would utterly repudiate the adultery that had led them to exile in the first place.

The identity of the city in verses 10 and 11 is unclear. Is it a reference to Jerusalem, as



some have argued? Does it represent the unfaithful among the people? Or is it about the cities of their foes? If we understand this city in terms of the city of man, there is no reason why it couldn't include all of these in its representation of the sinful enemies of the Lord and the unfaithful. Their city would be ruined and left to the wilderness.

It would be burned and never rebuilt. The largest section ends with a final declaration of the Lord's purpose to redeem and restore his people, judging their oppressors and bringing his people back to his land. The image is of a harvest, with the whole near east a threshing floor, whether of grain or olives.

The Lord would beat the nations, from Assyria to Egypt, and even if his people were like scattered olives on their branches, he would carefully pluck them one by one and return them to his land. The trumpet would be blown, summoning the exiles to return, flowing up to the worship of the Lord on the holy mountain of Zion. Perhaps we should see an image of the resurrection here, with the lost in Assyria referring to the dead.

The Lord would once more make his gracious presence known among his people, and the people would be assembled as a company of worshippers. A question to consider. Where else in Isaiah do we see greater demonic enemies of the Lord coming into view, behind the immediate foes of the nations? How can the connection between the nations and the power of Satan help us better to understand the significance and the character of each? As our chapter 28 begins what is generally seen as a new collection within the book, taking us through to chapter 39, there are a few subdivisions within this section, most notably the narrative section of chapters 36 to 39.

Chapters 34 and 35 are also often treated as a distinct subsection, although chapter 33 is sometimes joined with them. Chapters 28 to 33 might relate to those chapters in a similar way as chapters 13 to 23 in the Oracles Against the Nations related to chapters 24 to 27, which move from the specificity of judgments upon particular cities and nations to a more general eschatological vision. These chapters are structured by five Woe oracles, all introduced with the same word, variously translated as Woe, Ha, Ah or He, a word that we have already encountered several times in the book of Isaiah, especially in chapter 5. While the earlier Oracles Against the Nations address the earth with a wide angle lens, addressing nations and cities throughout the world, from Babylon in the east to Tyre in the west, in this section the frame of the prophetic vision once again narrows to focus on Ephraim and Judah more particularly.

Whereas chapters 7 to 12 dealt with the crisis of the Syro-Ephraimite war in the 730s BC, as Judah and Jerusalem under Ahaz were threatened by the anti-Assyrian alliance of the Arameans or Syria and Israel, these chapters speak to a situation after the removal of the Syro-Ephraimite threat through Assyrian intervention, leading up to the crisis of the Assyrian invasion in 701 BC, which is recounted in the narrative section of chapters 36 to 39. Whereas Assyria had seemed to be King Ahaz's saviour in the 730s, now it is

becoming clearer that Assyria would likely be Judah's doom and the foreign policy of Ahaz no longer seems so brilliant. Now Judah's hopes turn to Egypt.

Isaiah addresses this developing crisis in these chapters, once again warning Judah against putting its hope in such an alliance rather than in the Lord. The section begins with Isaiah speaking to the rulers of the northern kingdom of Israel, the imminence of whose demise is probably generally apparent at this point. Samaria and Israel would fall to Shalmaneser V and Sargon II in 722 BC, leaving Judah next in line.

At this point the fall of Samaria was likely inevitable. The point of Isaiah is not to foretell that near inevitability, but to present Samaria and Israel as a cautionary lesson to Judah. The woe oracle of this chapter opens with an image of reeling drunkards of Ephraim wearing a fading garland of flowers upon their heads.

This comparison to drunkards illustrates the insensibility, instability and folly of the leaders of Israel. But the proud crown is not merely one worn by drunkards in their revelries, but Samaria itself, the proud crown of the rich valley on which its hill was situated. Samaria in its intoxication is dulled to the terror that is descending upon it in the form of the invading Assyrians, compared in verse 2 to a natural disaster, an extreme hailstorm or tempest, a deluge that the Lord is bringing upon the nation that will submerge it.

In its wake the proud crown, the symbol both of Israel's decadent intoxication and of its capital Samaria, will be trodden underfoot by the enemy or plucked off and eaten like a first ripe fig, an ominous image perhaps making the hero wonder which other figs would ripen next. In contrast to the proud crown of Ephraim that would be trampled underfoot is the Lord himself as the crown of glory of his faithful remnant, the Lord the true king of his people. Instead of the inebriation and moral insensibility of the judges and rulers of Samaria, the Lord would bring a spirit of justice and would empower the defenders of the nation.

The whole ethos could not be more opposed. Commentators are divided on the question of the persons who are in view in verse 7 and onwards. Does this continue the description of Samaria and its leaders or has the focus now shifted to Judah and its leaders? I am inclined to see the verses referring to Judah and its leaders.

The priests and prophets of Judah are no different from the rulers of Israel. They are no less intoxicated, staggering in their drunkenness, their vision blurred and their judgment impaired. The prophet is the one who is supposed to give his vision to the people.

The priest judgments in accordance with the law. Both parties, however, here are utterly incapacitated by drink. This presumably refers to the iniquity of the people, but likely also to their excessive indulgence.

Elsewhere, drunkenness is presented as a sign of divine judgment, so we should probably regard their intoxication as a sign that they are marked out for destruction. Just as a drunkard might spew up vomit upon the drinking tables, so the drunk prophets and priests of Judah are vomiting everywhere, covering everything with their filth. Perhaps there is a suggestion here that the tables in question include the table of the altar and the tables in the holy place at which the priests had to serve.

The speaker in verses 9 and 10 is not clear. It might still be the prophet, or it might be that, just as revelers might engage in drunken mocking, the prophets and priests of Judah are ridiculing the faithful prophet. Some commentators have argued that these are the Lord's own words from the past.

Garry Smith argues, I believe persuasively, that as there is no explicit reference to a different speaker introducing these verses, and as the teaching of verse 10 is presented in a derogatory fashion, the most likely option is that these are the direct words of Isaiah to the prophets and the priests of Judah, exposing the emptiness of their teaching. Their teaching is like the slurred and stumbling speech of drunken men, perhaps suited only for infants and young toddlers, who with their unsteady gait, lack of self-control and dignity, and clumsy speech would be the natural counterparts of such drunkards. Verse 10 likely mocks their teachings then, presenting them as like the stuttering speech of a drunk, or the gibberish of a toddler, a cluster of repeating yet nonsensical monosyllables, which is apparent in the original Hebrew.

On account of their failure in speech, the failure to bring light and knowledge through their teaching, the Lord would communicate with them in a language more appropriate, in the strange lips and foreign tongues of Assyrian invaders. The word of the Lord to them would sound much like their own drunken speech, but now in the mouths of an enemy nation that he had brought upon them, whose language they could not understand. Paul, of course, refers to this passage in 1 Corinthians chapter 14, in his discussion of tongues as a sign to unbelievers.

If it didn't already occur in verse 7, by verse 14 the focus has clearly shifted to Jerusalem and its rulers, who are now explicitly addressed. The scoffers of Jerusalem need to learn the lessons from the fate of their brethren to the north. They seem to fancy themselves immune to the disaster that is coming, because they have made a covenant with death and an agreement with Sheol.

It is likely, given the focus of subsequent chapters, that this refers to their turn to Egypt in their foreign policy, trusting Egypt to rescue them from the Assyrians. In the characterization of alliance with Egypt as a covenant with death and an agreement with Sheol, the suicidal character of Judah's foreign policy is exposed. It is also contrasted most sharply with the true covenant that the people were supposed to have with the Lord their God.

Their covenant with Egypt was taking refuge in lies and falsehood and would ultimately not provide them with the security for which they hoped. Rather, they would find that, in looking to death and Sheol, they would descend to the grave. Perhaps in death and Sheol we might be expected to hear a reference to the false gods of Egypt, who lay behind its power.

In contrast to the false refuge to which Judah and its leaders have turned, the Lord is establishing a true sanctuary in Jerusalem, which he describes in terms of the laying of a foundational cornerstone. We should probably see this cornerstone as a representation of the Lord's manifest covenant commitment to his people, seen in such things as the Davidic king, the strength of a faithful Zion, the Lord's keeping of his promises, and the restored community of the remnant. The statement, whoever believes will not be in haste, has been understood by some to be an inscription upon the cornerstone, by others to be a statement about its import.

Either way, the point is that the person who trusts in the Lord will be established and will enjoy the confidence and calm that comes from that. The refuge of Egypt, to which Judah's leaders were turning, would be swept away. However, the Lord's sure refuge would stand firm against all storms, established firmly upon the choice cornerstone, and built up with the true standards of justice and righteousness, in contrast to the structure of lies upon which the people were actually trusting.

As their false refuge was destroyed in the time of crisis, their covenant with death and Sheol, the terrible powers to which they had turned, rather than to the Lord in the time of their distress, would prove ineffectual and would be swept away. Egypt would prove to be like a short bed with small blankets, and no amount of shifting around would keep Judah comfortable and warm in the bitter winter that was coming. Not only would the refuge fail them once, the failure of the refuge would be bitter, as time and again they would be battered by their foes without any relief.

Verse 21 seems to refer back to great victories that the Lord gave his people against their foes. At Mount Perizim, in 2 Samuel 5, verse 20, the Lord had given David a great victory against the Philistines. His words on that occasion were, The Lord has broken through my enemies before me like a breaking flood.

In the valley of Gibeon, in events recorded in Joshua 10, the Lord has struck down many Canaanites who fought with Ananiabesek against the children of Israel, striking them down with large hailstones. These two great victories might remind us of verse 2. Behold, the Lord has won who is mighty and strong, like a storm of hail, a destroying tempest, like a storm of mighty overflowing waters, he cast down to the earth with his hand. The Lord's might had been manifested in such deliverances in the past.

However, the might of the Lord would now be against Jerusalem and Israel. The scoffing leaders of the people should cease immediately, lest matters become even worse for

them, because the Lord had decreed the destruction of the land. They needed to come to terms with him as swiftly as possible.

The concluding verses of this chapter have a very different tone. They present the illustration of a wise small farmer who knows how and when to plough, sow, thresh, beat and prepare grain for bread, having been taught the ways of agriculture by God's teaching through the natural order. In learning and heeding these lessons, the farmer is able to conduct his work successfully and has the results to show for it at harvest time and in the final results of flour for bread and other produce.

The Lord is often compared to a farmer, dealing with his people as with a field of grain, a vineyard or as an olive orchard. The wise learn from the Lord and act accordingly. The message of these verses is found in verses 26 and 29.

Just as the wise farmer learns from the Lord, so ought the leaders of Judah to learn from him, heeding his counsel rather than following the example of doomed Israel, the teaching of their drunken priests and prophets, or turning to Egypt and the powers of death for security against Assyria. A question to consider. 1 Peter chapter 2 alludes to this passage in speaking of the building of the church upon Jesus Christ as the chief cornerstone.

How might Peter's use of this passage illumine the words of Isaiah and vice versa? Isaiah chapter 29 is the second chapter in the larger section running from chapter 28 to 39 and in the sub-section from chapter 28 to 33. In the preceding sections from chapters 13 to 27, Isaiah addressed the nations and the judgments that the Lord was going to bring upon them immediately through Assyria in the years around 701 BC and later through Babylon. Chapters 13 to 23 contain the oracles concerning the nations and chapters 24 to 27 a more general eschatological vision of the Lord's judgment and transformation of the earth.

The chapters from chapter 28 also deal with the years leading up to 701 BC and Assyria's invasion of Judah. However, the focus is now upon Judah itself, which seems to be turning to Egypt for aid rather than to the Lord. There are five repetitions of woe in this larger section, in chapter 28 verse 1, in chapter 29 verse 1, verse 15, in chapter 30 verse 1, 31 verse 1 and 33 verse 1. In the preceding chapter, Israel was described as engaged in drunken revelries, insensitive to the dreadful fate that was about to come upon it.

The beginning of the woe oracle of chapter 29 speaks of another city that is dull to its situation in its celebration of feasts, Jerusalem's feasts here seem to be the feasts of the festal calendar, but the implication is that they are being celebrated in a manner that produces the same moral insensitivity, perhaps on the basis of some measure of the sort of presumption described back in chapter 1. They are continually going through the repeated motions of the annual feasts, yet are getting no nearer to God. The meaning of

the term ariel is debated by scholars, while various proposals for the meaning of the term have been advanced, for instance as a lion of God, the most likely is that it is a reference to the altar. The term is used with that sense in Ezekiel chapter 43 verses 15 and 16.

This would be a fitting term for a description of Jerusalem that centers the cult of the temple, as the reference to the annual feasts in verse 1 might support. It would also be a fitting term for the wordplay at the end of verse 2, where Jerusalem is not merely referred to as ariel, but where the Lord says that she will be to him like an ariel. Jerusalem, the city of the altar, would become like an altar, with the nation the sacrifice to be offered upon it.

David had encamped in Jerusalem, in verse 1, making it his capital. However, the Lord would encamp against the city, seen in the forces of the invading Assyrians. This encamping against Jerusalem would involve the erection of siege works and towers, for which the Assyrians were renowned.

Jerusalem and Judah would be brought down to the dust and the earth, perhaps to be understood as a claim that they would descend to the grave, becoming little more than the shadowy ghost of a departed city. Yet although they might consider the foreign power that so defeated them to be invincible and invulnerable, that foe was actually like dust and chaff on the threshing floor, which would be easily removed when the wind of the Lord came upon them. And come upon them it would.

In theophanic language, which might recall the appearance of the Lord at Sinai, for instance, verses 5 and 6 describe the terrible advent of the Lord. In the face of the Lord's glorious appearance, the nations would be like a dream, which swiftly vanishes and is forgotten when one awakes. As the dream describes a man thinking that his hunger or thirst is being satisfied, when, in fact, he will await to discover that his hunger hasn't been assuaged nor his thirst quenched, so Assyria would find that Jerusalem, upon which it fancied it would feast, has been removed from its clutches.

However, as verse 10 describes Jerusalem's own leaders as insensible, it is also possible that they are the ones referred to here, with the point being the unreality of a dream. As if frustrated with the insensitivity of the people to the word of the Lord, the prophet tells them completely to incapacitate themselves, like making themselves blind or drunk. In this they would merely be enacting the judgment of insensitivity to the word of the Lord that the Lord has afflicted them with.

Earlier in the book, in Isaiah's commission, in chapters 6, 9 and 10, the Lord had said to him, lest they see with their eyes and hear with their ears, and understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed. The judgment with which they were judged particularly afflicted their prophets and seers, those who were supposed to give the people guidance and vision from the Lord. As the pressing issues of the day were those of foreign policy,

the word of the prophets who had guidance from the Lord would be particularly important.

Yet the vision of the Lord, described in verses 11 and 12, had become like a closed book to the people. The book was sealed, and even if it were opened, they would not have the wisdom and the knowledge to read it. All of their supposed worship and devotion to the Lord is superficial and hollow.

They pay lip service to the Lord, they go through the religious motions, but their hearts are far from him, and what might appear to the unaware as genuine religious devotion is merely a rote following of the teaching of the priests. The Lord, however, is going to shake things up, he's going to bring a shock upon the people, performing wonders that dismay all of their wise men. Verses 15 and 16 describe what is likely the planning of the counsellors of Hezekiah, who are seeking to form an alliance with Egypt, rather than heeding what the Lord has said concerning the situation.

The Lord has said that he would crush the Assyrians, and that they should not turn to Egypt, and yet they are acting as if they can keep their planning secret from him, as if he would not hold them to account. All of this is, as the Lord says, to turn things upside down. It is the Lord who is the creator, it is the Lord who is the potter, it is the Lord whose plans will not fall to the ground.

In their great presumption, they think that they are wiser than God. In just a short period of time, if only they would heed the Lord, there would be a dramatic reversal of the situation. Verse 17 might be referring to barren places made fruitful, or alternatively to the cutting down of great trees.

It seems more likely to me that there is a reversal being emphasised here. The great trees of Lebanon would be brought down, and the land would be made into a fruitful field, and on the other hand, the fruitful field would become a mighty forest of cedars. Great trees elsewhere represent the powers and rulers of a people.

The mighty would be brought low, and the weak of the people lifted up. The spiritual insensitivity of the people described earlier in the chapter would also be addressed. Blindness and deafness would be reversed, and people would hear the word of the Lord.

The poor and the meek would rejoice in the Lord. The ruthless, the scoffer, and those who watch to do evil would all be cut off. The ruthless are the cruel and oppressive.

The scoffers are those who actively undermine the law of the Lord, by mocking both it and the righteous, and those who watch to do evil are predatory oppressors. In the following verse, we see that these people are using the perversion of justice to get their ways. They are using false testimony, with a word making a man out to be an offender.

They are using legal trips and traps to subvert and frustrate the righteous in his cause,

and they are using the multiplication of empty words to obscure justice. In verse 22, the Lord brings the patriarchs into the picture, Abraham and Jacob. Jacob, who has formerly been ashamed looking at his offspring, will no longer be so.

His descendants will come to honour the Lord as holy, and even those who have gone astray will be reformed. A question to consider at the end of this chapter, with the reference to Jacob and Abraham, issues of spiritual paternity are brought into view. What are some of the ways in which we see scripture using people's relationship with their forefathers as a means of exhortation and challenge? The section of Isaiah running from chapter 28-39 speaks to Judah in the years prior to 701 BC and the invasion of the Assyrians under Sennacherib, concluding with a narrative account of the events of the siege and other key events in King Hezekiah's reign.

The subsection we are currently looking at focuses more directly upon Judah and runs from chapter 28-33, a series of chapters containing five woe statements. Faced with the rising Assyrian threat, especially considering the downfall of the northern kingdom of Israel in 722 BC, Judah and its leaders were tempted to turn to Egypt for aid. These intentions had likely been alluded to in the preceding chapter, in verses 15 and 16.

Ah, you who hide deep from the Lord your counsel, whose deeds are in the dark, and who say, Who sees us? Who knows us? You turn things upside down. Shall the potter be regarded as the clay, that the thing made should say of its maker, He did not make me, or the thing formed say of him who formed it, He has no understanding. There were also warnings about the unreliability of Egypt back in chapter 20, in the context of the recapture of Ashdod by the Assyrians in 711 BC.

As we read in verses 3-5 of that chapter. Then the Lord said, As my servant Isaiah has walked naked and barefoot for three years as a sign and a portent against Egypt and Cush, so shall the king of Assyria lead away the Egyptian captives and the Cushite exiles, both the young and the old, naked and barefoot, with buttocks uncovered, the nakedness of Egypt. Then they shall be dismayed and ashamed because of Cush their hope, and Egypt their boast.

In chapters 30 and 31 however, Isaiah addresses the plan to go to Egypt for aid much more directly. The Lord is the one to whom Judah should be turning, rather than the unreliable Egypt, from whom they will not receive the help for which they are hoping. The plans in question might have been the last roll of the dice, perhaps one forced upon Hezekiah by those around him, when all other avenues of help seemed to have failed.

The history of Israel and Judah with Egypt was of course extensive. Most notably the Lord had delivered them from Egypt by Moses at the time of the Exodus. At that time the Lord had warned them about returning to Egypt, and of the dangers of looking to Egypt for military aid, going back there to get horses and chariots.



King Solomon had ended up forming a marriage treaty with Egypt, marrying the daughter of the king of Egypt. He became an intermediary for Egypt in its trading in the region. Most troubling of all, he ended up emulating the pharaohs in various ways, not least in his turning from the Lord, toleration of idols, and subjection of his people to a sort of bondage.

Key enemies of Solomon took refuge in Egypt, and after Solomon's death, Shishak, king of Egypt, came up against Jerusalem and plundered it, in the fifth year of the reign of Rehoboam, Solomon's son, stripping it of many of Solomon's treasures. Alliance with Egypt then had very bad precedent. Judah's attempt to ally with Egypt was an act manifesting their stubborn rebellion against the Lord.

John Oswald notes that their adding sin to sin in verse 1 might refer to their adding of the sin of concealment to their sin of alliance with Egypt. Another possibility is that this recalls the earlier sin of Judah during the reign of King Ahaz, when they turned to Assyria for help during the Syro-Ephraimite war against the word of the Lord. Assyria had crushed Damascus, and then also Israel, but now was turning to Egypt for aid against the Assyrians from whom they had earlier sought help.

Rather than turning to the Lord, their God and their true king, they returned to the idolatrous Egyptians from whom he had once delivered them. Egypt was at that time under the 25th dynasty, ruled by Nubians from Kush, who had taken over Egypt. While they had consolidated their rule in the land of Egypt by this time, the Egyptians were definitely not the powerful force in the wider region that they once had been.

The prophecy underlines the fact that Egypt would not be an effective or reliable source for aid. Verse 6 likely involves some sort of wordplay. The word for oracle is the same as the word for burden, and is a word used elsewhere for burdens carried by beasts.

The beasts of the Negev here probably describe the wild animals on the dangerous wilderness path between Jerusalem and the land of Egypt. In seeking this alliance, Judah is sending riches into treacherous territory, not merely in the literal sense of the dangerous route that their envoys have to take, but metaphorically in the futility of the venture more generally. Even if they succeed in reaching Egypt with their treasures, Egypt itself is impotent, and will be unable to help them.

They should have learned that lesson from Ashdod a decade earlier. Indeed, the Lord describes Egypt as Rahab who sits still. Rahab is the legendary sea monster, a monster that along with Leviathan can sometimes stand for foreign powers.

Yet for all of its supposed might, this chaos monster isn't going to budge, not possessing sufficient power to act. This chapter began by describing Judah as stubborn children, and in verse 8 the prophet turns to characterize and expose their sinfulness more directly. Books, scrolls and tablets are not merely vehicles for text bearing information.

As physical objects themselves they can serve a purpose, whether as a literal instruction or as prophetic imagery underlining the seriousness of the message. The Lord commands Isaiah to write it on a tablet, with the tablet functioning as a memorial and a witness against them from that time forward. The exact message in view is unclear.

Presumably it was some portion of this section from chapter 28 to 33, or maybe even the whole. Perhaps one of the reasons for this writing down of the message was due to their refusal to heed the message at that time. After they had learned their error the hard way, and were in a more chastened state of mind, then the witness of Isaiah's word against them could be heard.

Their unwillingness to hear was displayed in active resistance to the seers and the prophets. Like fools, they insisted upon flattery and obliging words. They have made up their minds, and they are not about to allow the Lord to gainsay them.

They declare that they do not want to hear any more of the Holy One of Israel, probably not literally, but in their hearts that is the import. So the Holy One of Israel addresses them. Since they had so rejected His counsel, the judgment for their sin in this matter would hang like the sword of Damocles over their heads, dooming them to sudden and devastating disaster from which there would be no recovery.

Their one hope had been returning to the Lord in repentance, trusting in Him and holding their nerve. However, they would not trust the Lord, trusting rather to their own schemes in order to escape the impending crisis, ultimately fearing the Assyrians much more than their God. For this reason the Lord would deliver them into the hands of their foes, empowering their enemies against them.

Isaiah's words in verse 17 recall the words of Moses in his song in Deuteronomy 32 verse 30. How could one have chased a thousand, and two have put ten thousand to flight, unless their rock had sold them, and the Lord had given them up? Few would be left as they fled from the face of the Assyrians. The flagstaff that remained on the top of the mountain might be a reference to the beleaguered Jerusalem, which ultimately survived the siege, even when the rest of Judah was overrun by the Assyrians.

Perhaps this fragile remnant explains the claim of the next verse, where the Lord declares His intent to be gracious to them when the time comes. The chapter now turns to a positive message of salvation. Judgment would not be the Lord's final word to the nation.

They would be restored on the other side, and the Lord would be gracious and merciful to them. The city that had once been devastated would be restored, and they would be delivered from their distress. Their present suffering, the bitterness of the bread and the water of the siege rations, would be for their teaching, and He would again reveal Himself as their Teacher, instructing them in the way that they should go, presumably

chiefly through the words of His prophets.

This word, however, would be near to them at all times, giving them confidence of sure guidance as they move forward as a people. One of the immediate effects of the nearness of the Lord and His instruction would be the utter rejection of idolatry, which they would completely abhor. They would desecrate and violently cast away their false gods.

The Lord would bless the land with rain and fertility, as He promised in the blessings of the covenant. As the people turned back to Him, they would experience the full measure of His goodness towards them. That goodness would enrich and heal every area of their lives and land.

Instead of their current darkness and distress, the coming of the Lord would be the advent of glorious light. In another theophanic depiction of the glorious and dreadful coming of the Lord, Isaiah describes the Lord coming in His wrath against the nations. More particularly, Isaiah speaks of the name of the Lord coming.

John Watts suggests that this usage is unique. We would usually expect to hear of the glory of the Lord coming. The name of the Lord is connected with His character, reputation and honour.

It is the object of His people's worship and trust. Exodus 23, verse 21 also describes the name of the Lord being in the angel of the covenant sent before them in the Exodus. The description of the advent of the Lord also recalls the earlier description of the coming of the Assyrians in chapter 8, verses 7-8.

Therefore, behold, the Lord is bringing up against them the waters of the river, mighty in many, the King of Assyria and all His glory. And it will rise over all its channels and go over all its banks, and it will sweep on into Judah. It will overflow and pass on, reaching even to the neck, and its outspread wings will fill the breadth of your land, O Emmanuel.

Now, however, a greater power is coming, and those who once overwhelmed Judah would themselves be overwhelmed. The victory and deliverance of the Lord would cause the people to rejoice. In chapter 28, verses 17-18, the Lord had warned Judah of the consequences of its alliance with Egypt.

And I will make justice the line, and righteousness the plumb-line, and hail will sweep away the refuge of lies, and waters will overwhelm the shelter. Then your covenant with death will be annulled, and your agreement with Sheol will not stand. When the overwhelming scourge passes through, you will be beaten down by it.

Once again there would be a great reversal, as the Lord struck the Assyrians with the same devastating power with which He had struck His people by them. The Lord Himself would fight against His people's foes, and as He did so, they would worship. He would do

so with an appointed staff.

The means of Assyria's destruction has already been set apart for the purpose. Likewise, a funeral pyre for Assyria has also been appointed, just waiting for the time that its king will be laid upon it. Assyria is doomed, and when its day finally comes, the Lord would light the pyre, all the might of Assyria being consumed as its flames licked up its corpse.

A question to consider, how could we summarise the contrast between Egypt and the Lord as sources of help and assistance, and as objects of trust that this chapter draws? As our chapter 31 continues chapter 30's warnings against turning to Egypt for aid, the Assyrians came against Judah in 701 BC, defeated 46 of their fortified cities, and besieged Jerusalem. In the crisis, the leaders of Judah turned their gaze to the south, to Egypt, for aid. Israel's history with Egypt justified profound wariness of such an alliance.

A former alliance with Egypt during the reign of Solomon had ended badly, with Shishak of Egypt coming up against Jerusalem and plundering it in the reign of Rehoboam, Solomon's son, in addition to his harbouring fugitives such as Hadad the Edomite and Jeroboam the son of Nebat, who would later be thorns in the side of the house of David. During his reign, Solomon became the leading weapons trader in the region, exporting Egyptian horses and chariots to the kings of the Hittites and the Arameans. However, in forming a marriage alliance with Egypt, and in going to Egypt for horses, Solomon had broken key commandments given to the king in Deuteronomy.

In Deuteronomy 17, verse 16, in one of the laws of the king, we read, Only he must not acquire many horses for himself, or cause the people to return to Egypt in order to acquire many horses, since the Lord has said to you, you shall never return that way again. Horses and chariots were essential elements of any powerful ancient Near Eastern war machine, and Egypt was the best place to go to get them. Chariots, the tanks of their day, were one of the reasons why the Israelite tribes in the plains had struggled to dispossess the Canaanites in those regions of the land, who had iron chariots.

While much of Judah's terrain was not well suited for chariots, they were a prestige war machine, and a large force of chariots and horses projected an image of power. In the right conditions, they could be immensely powerful. When Assyria came up against Judah, Sennacherib had a great number of chariots.

When he marked Hezekiah and his forces at Jerusalem, the Rabshakeh had implied that, even if the men of Judah were given many horses and chariots, they wouldn't have the competence to ride them. 2 Kings 18, verses 23 and 24 Come now, make a wager with my master the king of Assyria. I will give you two thousand horses, if you are able on your part to set riders on them.

How then can you repulse a single captain among the least of my master's servants, when you trust in Egypt for chariots and for horsemen? This chapter opens with another

woe statement, building upon the message of the preceding chapter. Many in Judah had put their hope in military might and weaponry to save them. If only, they reasoned, we had the latest chariots and the finest horses, we would be able to resist the Assyrians.

However, the Lord, who was supposed to be their God and their King, was utterly disregarded in their considerations. They put more store in technology and human might than they did in the Creator of the Universe. Trusting in their own shrewdness and real politic, they were unmindful of the wisdom of the Lord and of the certainty of His word and counsel.

And yet He would bring disaster upon them and their machinations would not be able to withstand His plans. The Lord's purposes cannot be thwarted or frustrated. He acts with sure power and in accordance with His holiness against all evil.

Much as in His message concerning the ultimately frail humanity behind the terrifying Syro-Ephraimite alliance in chapter 7, the Lord seeks to demythologize the might of Egypt. While Egypt was likely perceived as an immense and near irresistible power by many of Isaiah's contemporaries, the Lord contrasts them with Him and their power with His power. The contrast is nothing less than that between man and God, between the frailty of the flesh and the immense power of the spirit.

If Judah relied upon Egypt for its deliverance, it would find that Egypt would not be able to bear its weight. When the Lord stretched out His hand in judgment, Egypt would fail, as would Judah, with a devastating outcome for both. What is the alternative to looking to Egypt for aid? From verse 4 to the end of the short chapter, the Lord describes the help that He can provide to His people.

He compares Himself to a lion that has taken a lamb. Even were a whole band of shepherds to come against Him, they could not scare Him off, nor could they separate Him from His prey. When the Lord comes to fight at Mount Zion, He will display the same persistence and ferocity in the face of all of their foes, protecting Zion from their clutches.

The second comparison is to hovering birds, presumably over their nests and young when a predator comes near. Besides the fearless persistence of the lion, the Lord will lovingly shield His people as the mother bird might protect her chicks. Similar imagery is used in the Song of Moses in Deuteronomy 32, verses 9-12.

But the Lord's portion is His people, Jacob His allotted heritage. He found Him in a desert land, and in the howling waste of the wilderness, He encircled him, He cared for him, He kept him as the apple of His eye. Like an eagle that stirs up its nest, that flutters over its young, spreading out its wings, catching them, bearing them on its pinions, the Lord alone guided him, no foreign god was with him.

In such a manner the Lord would deliver His people. The prophet exhorts the people to turn back to the Lord, repenting of their iniquity. In verse 22 of the preceding chapter, Isaiah had declared, In verse 7, the people's casting away of their idols is again described.

As the Lord defends and redeems His people, the futility, impotence and wickedness of idols will become apparent to the people, and they will entirely reject them. The Lord Himself, not human power, would strike the Assyrians, causing them to flee. We might see the fulfilment of this in chapter 37, verses 36-37.

And the angel of the Lord went out and struck down 185,000 in the camp of the Assyrians. And when people arose early in the morning, behold, these were all dead bodies. Then Sennacherib king of Assyria departed, and returned home, and lived at Nineveh.

The Lord was described as the Rock of Israel in verse 29 of the preceding chapter. Assyria has its own rock, perhaps in Sennacherib, perhaps in a mighty city, or perhaps in a false god. However, their rock would pass away, while the rock of Israel would stand unmoved.

Again, in the preceding chapter, Isaiah had spoken of a thousand men of Judah fleeing before one, on account of the people's sin. This possibly looked back to Deuteronomy chapter 32, verse 30 in the Song of Moses. However, the verse that follows that contrasts the Lord's people's source of strength with that of their enemies.

For their rock is not as our rock, our enemies are by themselves. The chapter concludes by speaking of the Lord's bond with Jerusalem, but in terms of his fire that burns there. We might think back here to the description of Jerusalem as aerial, or altar, at the beginning of chapter 29.

The fire and furnace of the Lord makes us think of the altar, and also of the consuming holiness of the Lord, that would destroy all that would violate the place of his dwelling. A question to consider. Verse 3 contrasts flesh and spirit.

Where else in the Old Testament might we get a sense of what this contrast involves? In Isaiah chapter 28 to 39, we have prophecies more directly addressed to Judah in the period prior to and during the Assyrian crisis of 701 BC, with the crisis itself and other events surrounding it being recounted in the narrative of chapters 36 to 39. The preceding chapters, Isaiah chapter 28 to 31, contained five woe oracles, particularly warning Judah of the danger of going down to Egypt for aid. In chapter 32, the blessing that the people could experience from the Lord is contrasted with their current grim state and the disaster that they currently face.

This continues the argument of the earlier chapters in this section, which draw similar

contrasts. Behind these contrasts between outcomes is a deeper contrast between faith in and fear of the Lord, and faith in and fear of the nations. The interpreter of chapter 32 is immediately faced with the question of the identity of the king who will reign in righteousness, introduced to us in verse 1. Is this a future messianic figure? Christopher Seitz argues that it is not.

This oracle does not foretell this king's advent, but speaks of him as a present figure. This king has already been foretold, he argues, back in chapters 7 and 9 during the crisis of the Syro-Ephraimite War. Here it is important to consider the ways in which the crises of the Syro-Ephraimite War and of the 701 BC Assyrian invasion are paralleled in these chapters in Isaiah, juxtaposing the two situations and the contrasting responses of Ahaz and Hezekiah.

The woe oracles of the preceding chapters, Seitz argues, were not levelled against Hezekiah, rather their condemnations focus upon other leading figures in Judah. Hezekiah as the righteous king exemplifies wisdom and trust that contrasts with his contemporaries. Many commentators remark upon the wisdom style of this section, and this might give some support to an alternative reading, where the king described here is not an actual king, whether currently present or foretold, but a portrait of what a wise and good king would be like.

Brevard-Charles observes the similarity of the language used to describe the rule of the righteous king here, and the language used of the Lord's own righteous rule, back in chapter 25, verses 4-5. The righteous king is a means by which the Lord's own sheltering of his people is accomplished. He protects his people from the assaults of foreign enemies, and is also a refuge from injustice for those within the land.

The justice he administers is like shade in heat, and refreshing and reviving water in the desert. Righteous kings are also exemplars for their people, setting the tone for the rest of the people by their behaviour and their just judgements. This is, of course, a recurring theme in the history of the kingdoms of Judah and Israel.

Even in modern societies, the monarch can be seen as the leading layperson, and their behaviour and values have a significant impact upon the values of their subjects, either giving license to their wickedness, or encouraging their faithfulness. Through the righteous king, the Lord will address the spiritual dullness and insensitivity of the people, opening eyes and ears that have formerly been closed. The establishment of righteousness and justice on the throne transforms social values.

Fools and scoundrels, here described in their false and wicked speech that misguides others, and their oppression of the poor and needy, are no longer held in honour and esteem, and no longer enjoy social status. Their despicable character is revealed for what it is when it is seen next to the noble and righteous ruler. It might be worth considering the attention given to the wisdom tradition during the reign of Hezekiah

when reading this passage.

Large sections of the Book of Proverbs were compiled during his reign. The Book of Proverbs has several proverbs concerning righteous kings, and their profound positive influence over their realms and people. Proverbs 16, verses 10-15 An oracle is on the lips of a king, his mouth does not sin in judgment.

A just balance and scales are the Lord's, all the weights in the bag are his work. It is an abomination to kings to do evil, for the throne is established by righteousness. Righteous lips are the delight of a king, and he loves him who speaks what is right.

A king's wrath is a messenger of death, and a wise man will appease it. In the light of a king's face there is life, and his favour is like the clouds that bring the spring rain. Proverbs 25, verses 4-5 Take away the dross from the silver, and the smith has material for a vessel.

Take away the wicked from the presence of the king, and his throne will be established in righteousness. Back in chapter 3, Isaiah prophesied against the wealthy women of Jerusalem. There we saw that the women represented the character of the society more generally.

They were the focus of its gaze, and they exemplified its values. Here in verse 9 and following, Isaiah again addresses such women, as he describes the disaster that must come upon the nation prior to its restoration. Perhaps the women are here focused upon because they are especially associated with the joy and the fruitfulness of the nation.

They are the ones who lead the songs at harvest time. The rich young women are the ones in whom the beauty and vivacity of the people are most fully seen. They are the ones from whom new life comes.

They are the ones living in the season of new love. Consequently, the instruction given to them to strip themselves of their finery, to humiliate themselves, to don mourning attire, and to take up a lament, makes the judgment stand out in its sharpest relief. The cause of their mourning is the utter devastation of the once fruitful land, and of the prosperous and populous city.

Formerly inhabited places will be reduced to wilderness ruins. However, this sets the scene for a remarkable reversal, described in the concluding verses of the chapter. The Lord would pour out his spirit, giving his personal presence and empowerment to his people, like water to revive the parched wilderness.

The effect of the Spirit's advent would be miraculous fruitfulness and growth. Formerly barren lands would become fruitful fields, and fruitful fields would become glorious forests. This fruitfulness is, in verse 16, directly connected with the coming of justice and righteousness.



The just and righteous rule of the Lord heals and enlivens the land. Behind much of the imagery of this section is a comparison between the Lord's justice in relationship to his people, and the rain and clouds in relation to the thirsty earth. The outcome of the coming of the Lord's justice would be peace, a sort of rest and well-being enjoyed in good relations with God, one's neighbour, and the land.

There would also be quietness and trust, the confidence of those who know that the Lord will provide for all of their needs and protection, and who happily commit themselves to his charge. The nation that has just been overrun by a foreign army would now dwell in peace and in security. Verse 19 is a surprising interruption.

Perhaps it's a reference to the judgment that Jerusalem will have to pass through before they are delivered. Alternatively, it might refer to the bringing down of the forest of Assyria. Their city and power would be laid low, and the Lord's people would be lifted up.

Verse 20 describes a situation of plenty, where the people have so many crops that they aren't afraid of them being destroyed by the waters, or by donkeys and oxen treading upon them. A question to consider, what are some of the specific ways in which a just ruler can set the tone for the behaviour of their entire people? Continuing to address Judah in the period prior to 701 BC, Isaiah speaks a word of hope into their increasingly dire situation. Gary Smith suggests that the context of this chapter might be the Assyrians breaking an agreement that was made when King Hezekiah paid tribute to them, something described in 2 Kings chapter 18 verses 14-16.

And Hezekiah king of Judah sent the king of Assyria, Lachish, saying, I have done wrong, withdraw from me, whatever you impose on me I will bear. And the king of Assyria required of Hezekiah king of Judah 300 talents of silver and 30 talents of gold. And Hezekiah gave him all the silver that was found in the house of the Lord and in the treasuries of the king's house.

At that time Hezekiah stripped the gold from the doors of the temple of the Lord, and from the doorpost that Hezekiah king of Judah had overlaid, and gave it to the king of Assyria. Reneging on this earlier treaty, Sennacherib apparently decided that he would settle for nothing less than Judah's unconditional surrender, and so he came up against Jerusalem. Naturally, the people of Judah were desperate and despairing.

All hope of deliverance or escape seemed lost. It is not certain that this is the context of chapter 33, although it seems to be the most plausible possibility. Judah's plight is grim, and yet the Lord declares that He will reverse it, defeating the Assyrians and granting them security.

Smith suggests that the prophecy might have been delivered in response to Hezekiah leading the people in repentance and in seeking the Lord's face in their crisis. The words of Isaiah take the form of a woe oracle, which we should probably see as ironic in

character. Assyria, which given the wider context of these prophecies, is almost certainly the object of this oracle, is characterized as a destroyer and a traitor.

Assyria's brutality and destructive power was well known in the ancient world. It was a cruel empire that maintained its rule in large measure through terrorizing its enemies, through mass executions, torture and making public spectacles of all who would oppose them. Over a century earlier, for instance, Assyrian kings described flaying rebels and covering city walls with their skins.

There are Assyrian reliefs from a palace in Nineveh in the British Museum which depict Assyrians forcing defeated nobles to grind the exhumed bodies of their ancestors. Those cities that did not immediately surrender to them could expect mass slaughter, cruel and creative tortures, and the most gruesome public spectacles. Assyria was also treacherous, quite prepared not to honor agreements when they considered them inconvenient, as we see in the case of Sennacherib's attack upon Jerusalem, even after Hezekiah's sending of tribute.

Assyria would itself face the sort of treatment with which it had treated others, being destroyed and betrayed. Those who lived by the sword and by treachery would die by the sword and by treachery. Perhaps just when they thought that they were secure, when they had put their predation on other nations to one side and were enjoying their ill-gotten gains, they would suffer the same fate that they had inflicted upon others.

Judah, however, perhaps in part because all other recourse and support was stripped from them, would turn to the Lord for his help. Hezekiah's prayer to the Lord in this moment of crisis is recorded for us in chapter 37, verses 16 to 20. You have made heaven and earth.

Incline your ear, O Lord, and hear. Open your eyes, O Lord, and see, and hear all the words of Sennacherib, which he has sent to mock the living God. Truly, O Lord, the kings of Assyria have laid waste all the nations and their lands and have cast their gods into the fire.

For they were no gods, but the work of men's hands, wood and stone. Therefore they were destroyed. So now, O Lord our God, save us from his hand, that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that you alone are the Lord.

While the people's turning to the Lord would be far from perfect, occurring only after other options had failed them, deliverance and restoration would follow from it. Verses 2 to 6 describe the coming of God as the warrior king against the foes of his distressed people, acting on behalf of the oppressed, bringing low and scattering the mighty, and spoiling their goods. The ultimate throne is not that of brutal empires like Assyria, but the Lord, who is enthroned in the heavens above all proud earthly powers.

It is in the Lord that the hope of Zion is to be found, not in Egypt, not in shrewd foreign policy, not in treaties with treacherous and cruel powers. All of the goods that Jerusalem so desperately longs for in its time of crisis stability, deliverance, guidance, counsel and insight, are found in the Lord and will be enjoyed by those who look to him within it. To a nation that lives by sight, it is difficult to recognize, but the true strength and treasure of Zion is not found in vast armies of horses and chariots, in powerful international allies, mighty fortifications and walls, and vast treasure houses full of gold and silver, but in the Lord himself, being enjoyed by all who fear and trust him.

Verses 7 to 9 describe the devastated people, perhaps when they heard the news that Sennacherib was coming up against Jerusalem, even after they thought that their sending of tribute would appease him. All are abject, struck with the most terrible despair and foreboding, every glimmer of hope extinguished. With their sense of abandonment and hopelessness, normal life and commerce ceases.

Trust has been betrayed. The word translated cities in the ESV of verse 8 might be better understood as a reference to witnesses, a parallel to the breaking of covenants. The most fruitful regions of the land are now barren.

The Lord's voice, however, breaks through the darkness of the nation's plight. At the moment of the people's greatest despair, he would act and prove his sovereignty. With a threefold now, the Lord heralds the reversal of the situation that he would accomplish.

The treacherous destroyer fancies himself immune in his power, conceiving his works to be immune to judgment, yet they are like chaff and stubble, light refuse to be burned. Indeed, it would be the destroyer's own fiery breath that would ignite the fire in which it would be burned. All the peoples would be destroyed by the fire like thorns.

Those peoples might be the other nations around Judah in whom they have been tempted to put their trust, along with Assyria itself. The Lord would, as we see in many other parts of scripture, reveal his mighty arm before the nations. When this occurred, it would not only be seen by nations far off, but also by peoples nearer to home, within Judah and in Jerusalem itself.

Chapter 31, verse 9, describes the Lord as the one As the power and justice of the Lord was displayed, sinners in Jerusalem would suddenly realize the seriousness of being in a city in the midst of which the living God dwelt. Earlier, in response to the theophany at the time of his commission in chapter 6, Isaiah had cried out in despair at his realization of his own uncleanness before the thrice holy Lord. Now the sinners in Zion would have a similar experience, as the true might and holiness of the Lord dawned upon them.

Who can live in the presence of such a God? As John Oswalt observes, the response of the prophet to the sinner's question, who among us can dwell with the consuming fire, recalls the language of passages such as Psalm 24, verses 3 to 5. He who has clean

hands and a pure heart, who does not lift up his soul to what is false, and does not swear deceitfully, he will receive blessing from the Lord, and righteousness from the God of his salvation. Integrity of heart and action, fleeing from evil and injustice, and commitment to the path of righteousness, is that which marks out those who will dwell in the presence of the Lord, and enjoy his blessings. The Lord will provide for and protect the righteous, but the wicked will be judged.

What will the consequences of the Lord's action on behalf of his people be? Verses 17 to 24 describe them. The image here, as Oswalt argues, likely combines elements of an eschatological and a historical vision. The king in view, in verse 17 he maintains, is almost certainly the Lord himself, the true King of Israel.

This would seem to be supported, he argues, by verse 22 of the chapter. For the Lord is our judge, the Lord is our lawgiver, the Lord is our King, he will save us. Brother Charles adopts a different line of interpretation, suggesting that we read the reference to the king in relation to the description of the righteous king in chapter 32, which in verse 1 read, Behold, a king will reign in righteousness, and princes will rule in justice.

However, he refrains from identifying the king with Hezekiah in particular. Such an identification, he argues, would be an unwarranted historicization of the text. The text is rather a more general declaration of the hope of Israel.

The expression, A king in his beauty, is a description of the righteous king's glory, splendor and majesty, who will rule over an expansive realm, which King Hezekiah most definitely did not. Charles is certainly correct in his resistance to pitting messianic readings of such texts against readings that focus on the Lord's sovereignty. Within the theology of Isaiah, there is no breach between these things.

The sovereignty of the Lord will be displayed through the deliverance wrought by his anointed one. Perhaps we should read this as a depiction of the ideal king, as the typological reality of which the smallest glimpse is seen in figures like Hezekiah. This ideal king is also a way in which we see the awaited one, in whom the full realization of the hopes of Israel would come.

In the days of this king's rule, Israel would look back on the current crisis, marveling at the way in which a disaster that had seemed to represent the final end of the nation and of them as a people, had vanished so completely into the past, leaving little lingering trace of the great fear and upheaval that it had involved. Rather, Jerusalem would be established like an immovable tent. The imagery here is surprising.

This is an image suggesting vulnerability, not a vision of a city with great fortifications and impregnable walls, but a stable tent, like a permanent tabernacle. However, the vulnerability of Jerusalem merely serves to underline the great measure of its security. The tent of Jerusalem would be untroubled, despite its weakness, because its security

and safety lies in the Lord who has established it.

Part of Jerusalem's weakness was found in its lack of a secure water supply to withstand a great siege. However, the Lord is like a broad river and streams for His city, yet impassable for the warships of their foes. The true judge, king and lawgiver of Zion is the Lord Himself.

The trust of the people of the Lord does not ultimately rest in the power of a human king, but in the God of heaven and earth. Verse 23 is difficult to interpret. To whom is the description with which it opens referring? Is it a picture of Judah like a ship in disarray? Oswald suggests that we read the verse as a contrast between Judah's current and their future state, after the Lord has acted on their behalf.

Also, what is the underlying metaphor here? Gary Smith points out that the terms used here don't typically refer to rigging, masts and sails. Besides, that sort of maritime imagery is not common in scripture. Rather, they are more usually used to refer to standards, banners and flagstaves.

He understands the imagery here as Isaiah's depiction of the deserted Assyrian camp. John Watts also questions the common interpretation of this verse as employing a metaphor of boats and ships. In his understanding, the meaning is that the apportionments, or lots of land in Judah, are released, and Assyria is powerless to secure the pedestal of their standards or raise their flags over them.

They are powerless to reassert their sovereignty in the land once more. The land will be reallocated, with even the weakest receiving a good portion. The result of the Lord's deliverance would be the healing of the people and the land, and it would manifest the Lord's forgiveness of all of their sins.

A question to consider. What are some of the ways in which the fact that the Lord was the true High King in Jerusalem was displayed in Judah's life and worship? How were they to understand the relationship between the Davidic King and the Lord in this regard? The oracles concerning the nations in Isaiah chapters 13-23 were followed by a more general statement of judgment upon the whole earth and prophecies of redemption in chapters 24-27. Many commentators see chapters 34 and 35 as serving a similar function for the oracles that are specially focused upon Judah and Jerusalem in chapters 28-33.

The attention given to Moab in chapters 24-27, Edward Young notes, might be compared to the way that Edom is singled out in chapters 34 and 35. Moab is the representative nation in the first general eschatological prophecies and Edom functions in a similar capacity here. These chapters describe the comprehensive breadth of the Lord's judgment.

We might, Christopher Sight's remarks, observe the similarities between the opening of

chapter 34 and Isaiah chapter 24 verses 1-6. Behold, the Lord will empty the earth and make it desolate, and he will twist its surface and scatter its inhabitants, and it shall be, as with the people, so with the priest, as with the slave, so with his master, as with the maid, so with her mistress, as with the buyer, so with the seller, as with the lender, so with the borrower, as with the creditor, so with the debtor. The earth shall be utterly empty and utterly plundered, for the Lord has spoken this word.

The earth mourns and withers, the world languishes and withers, the highest people of the earth languish. The earth lies defiled under its inhabitants, for they have transgressed the laws, violated the statutes, broken the everlasting covenant. Therefore a curse devours the earth, and its inhabitants suffer for their guilt.

Therefore the inhabitants of the earth are scorched, and few men are left. The place of chapters 34 and 35 within the wider text of Isaiah has been a matter of debate. Parallels with the language of Jeremiah have led some to argue that these chapters come from a later date and are dependent upon Jeremiah, although one could readily counter by arguing that the dependence could run in the opposite direction.

Charles Torrey argued that these two chapters form an introduction to the second half of the book, more typically identified as chapters 40 to 66, regarded by most commentators as coming from a later hand, although more conservative commentators typically strongly dispute this assessment. Gary Smith highlights the parallels that Jacques Vermeulen and Hugh Williamson observe between chapters 13 and 34, which Williamson lays out as follows. 13 vs.

17-19 34 vs. 5b-8 e. Land becomes a desert 13 vs. 20 34 vs.

9-10 f. Wild animals live there 13 vs. 21-22 34 vs. 11-15 These parallels would serve to bracket the larger section of chapters 13-35, which contain all of the oracles against the nations and the oracles against Judah.

The narrative material concerning the 701 BC Assyrian crisis that follows might be related to the material concerning the crisis of the Syro-Ephraimite war that precedes the section. The Great Isaiah Scroll, one of the best preserved of the Dead Sea Scrolls, likely dating from the 2nd century BC, has a break in its text between chapters 33 and 34. William Brownlee made the intriguing case that chapters 1-33 and 34-66 represent two paralleled panels of the book.

Chapters 7-8, the material concerning Isaiah's address to King Ahaz during the crisis of the Syro-Ephraimite war, most obviously parallels with chapters 36-39, which relates Isaiah's address to King Hezekiah in the years around the Assyrian crisis of 701 BC, but Brownlee argued for an even more extensive mapping of one half onto the next. Brownlee's thesis involved the doubtful speculation that the text of Isaiah that the Qumran scribe originally employed only contained the first 33 chapters and that he had

used a different text of Isaiah to complete the book. That larger text of Isaiah was, according to Brownlee, one whose latter half was produced not by Isaiah himself but by a later Isaianic school.

The similarities of language between chapters 34 and 35 and later chapters, along with possible structural relations, are worth considering. While we might discard some of the more speculative arguments for the text belonging to some later hand, we should appreciate the ways in which these chapters can both look forward and look backward within the text of Isaiah and in the process recognize something more of the overarching unity and structure of the book. The opening verses of the chapters summon all of the nations to attention, much as the opening verses of chapter 24 did.

The judgment, as there, is described in comprehensive and cosmic terms. In the Lord's anger he sentences the nations to destruction. They would suffer an ignominious death.

The bodies of their unburied slain, exposed and rotting, would fill the air with their putrefying stench. The mountains would flow with their blood, both land and air polluted by their death. Chapter 13 used cosmic imagery in describing the downfall of Babylon.

In verse 10, for instance, For the stars of the heavens and their constellations will not give their light, the sun will be dark at its rising, and the moon will not shed its light. In verse 13, therefore I will make the heavens tremble, and the earth will be shaken out of its place at the wrath of the Lord of hosts in the day of his fierce anger. Here again the prophet uses such imagery, speaking of the heavens rotting away, the skies being rolled up, and the host of the stars falling like leaves from a tree.

Revelation chapter 6 verses 12-14 employs imagery that is likely dependent upon verse 4 of our chapter. When he opened the sixth seal, I looked, and behold, there was a great earthquake, and the sun became black as sackcloth, the full moon became like blood, and the stars of the sky fell to the earth, as the fig tree sheds its winter fruit when shaken by a gale. The sky vanished like a scroll that is being rolled up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place.

The host of heaven would refer to the gods and rulers of the nations, whose power and thrones would be brought low. To the surprise of many readers and commentators, the Lord now turns to address Edom more particularly. This, as we have noted, is comparable to the way that Moab is singled out in chapter 25, in the more general eschatological section that follows the oracles against the nations in chapters 13-23.

Some ingenious yet unpersuasive theories have been advanced to explain its position here, for instance the idea that Edom ought to be interpreted as man, a theory which Jung attributes to Edward Cossain. The reference to Edom here is also an argument used against those who want to claim that all the material in the book of Isaiah comes from the hand of the prophet himself. Edom, they argue, is clearly a focus of prophetic

condemnation and declarations of judgment following their participation in the destruction and plundering of Jerusalem in 586 BC, when the city fell to Babylon.

Were this passage, they maintain, dated to the historical period around 701 BC, its material would be quite incongruous with the actual situation. We might note that Edom is excluded from the earlier material against the nations in chapters 13-23. John Oswald suggests that such explanations for the singling out of Edom here are quite unnecessary, as its inclusion is readily understood on other grounds.

First, Edom, on account of its association with Esau, was Israel's apostate and rejected twin, the most fitting contrast to it. Second, they had long been opponents to Judah. Formerly under the reign of Judah, they had broken free from Judah over a century earlier, during the reign of Jehoram.

During the reign of Amaziah, earlier in the 8th century, Judah had fought against the Edomites, defeating them. But then Amaziah set up the gods of Edom as his own gods and was judged. Amos, whose ministry overlapped with the time of the beginning of Isaiah's own, had prophesied against Edom too.

Earlier in Isaiah's own ministry, during the reign of Ahaz, the Edomites had defeated Judah in battle, described in 2 Chronicles 28, verses 16 and 17. At that time, King Ahaz sent the king of Assyria for help, for the Edomites had again invaded and defeated Judah and carried away captives. Most importantly, the singling out of Edom here, like the singling out of Moab earlier, is not on account of Edom being the most threatening or prominent opposing nation, but is representative and typical.

In chapter 24, verse 21, the Lord spoke of punishing the host of heaven, presumably referring to the false gods of the nations. The sword of the Lord drinking its fill in the heavens, described in verse 5, probably refers to such a judgment upon the demonic powers. Having been victorious in the heavens, the Lord's sword descends upon the nations of the earth, focusing upon Edom in particular, here described as the people devoted to destruction.

The destruction of Edom is described as if it were some sort of sacrifice. The Lord's sword is preparing animals and peoples for a great sacrifice in the Edomite city of Bozrah, also mentioned in chapter 63. Within the sacrificial system, animals represented people, and the animals described here likely represent various classes of persons in the land of Edom.

Much as the hyperbolic language of mountains flowing with blood was used in verse 3, so the land surrounding the great sacrifice of Edom would be like the land surrounding an altar, drinking up the blood that is poured out upon it. This would be a day of vengeance and a year of recompense, an appointed time of divine justice and judgment, within which the Lord would deliver his people and act against all of their foes. The rest



of the chapter describes what will happen to the people devoted to destruction that Edom represents.

Their streams would be turned into pitch and their soil into sulfur, rendering their land a devastated and impassable wasteland. We might here recall the judgment upon Sodom and Gomorrah, upon whom the Lord cast down fiery destruction. After the Lord prepared the altar and its sacrifice, the land of Edom would become an enduring conflagration, its flames and smoke unquenched, ascending like an unceasing testament to the Lord's just judgment upon his enemies.

Isaiah describes the removal of its rulers, the overgrown ruins of its former habitations, and the wild beasts and birds that would dwell in its condemned strongholds and fortresses. We should immediately recognize the similarities between these descriptions and those of Babylon in chapter 13, verses 20-22. These similarities strengthen the case for a relationship between chapters 34 and 5 and chapter 13, bracketing the larger body of material between them.

Oswald suggests that, while we might see Babylon as the distant example of doomed human pride, Edom is the much nearer one, Judah's closest neighbor. The longer list of the desert and wild animals here is one potentially surprising feature of the prophecy. In verses 16 and 17, the prophet seems to declare that the destiny of the people devoted to destruction has been thoroughly and comprehensively determined, down to the specific breeds of birds and animals that will dwell in their ruins and the fact that they would have mates.

The sentence, down to the smallest detail, has already been decreed and it is certain that it will be enacted upon them at the divinely appointed time. A question to consider. Where else in scripture do we see the juxtaposition of Israel and Edom? Isaiah chapters 34 and 35 conclude the body of prophecies that ran from chapter 28 to 33 and also the larger section beginning with the oracles against the nations in chapter 13.

These two chapters are more general, global and cosmic in their scope. They are also important in the larger structure of the book. Chapter 34 especially recalls chapter 13, but chapter 35 anticipates the later material of the book, in chapters 40 to 66, a fact that has led a majority of less conservative scholars to attribute it to a later hand.

There are certainly close comparisons to be drawn between the language and themes of this chapter and those of later chapters. Much in this chapter anticipates passages like chapter 40 verses 1 to 11 and then verse 10 is almost identically repeated in chapter 51 verse 11 and the ransomed of the Lord shall return and come to Zion with singing, everlasting joy shall be upon their heads, they shall obtain gladness and joy, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away. Of course, such commonalities do not demand the theory that this passage comes from a later date, while any who believe in Isaiah's authorship of the entire book, for instance, certainly have some difficult challenges to that position

to address.

Explaining commonalities of language between some material in chapters 1 to 39 and chapters 40 to 66 definitely isn't one of them. Likewise, lines of supposed dependence can generally just as readily be reversed. For those scholars who hold that other hands were involved in the writing of Isaiah, later material could have been informed by earlier material such as this chapter.

While the unity of these two chapters is also questioned by some scholars, they are in fact tightly connected. Chapter 34 spoke of the devastating judgment that would come upon the earth and those doomed to destruction, which the nation of Edom, Judah's near neighbor, particularly represented. In contrast to the devastation of the land of Edom, at the end of the preceding chapter, chapter 35 speaks of the healing and the fruitfulness of a once barren land.

Joseph Blenkinsop writes of these chapters, Together they form a diptych in which the final annihilation of Edom is contrasted with the ultimate well-being of Zion. The contrast embodies the theme of eschatological reversal, stated more incisively in the last section of the book, for instance, chapter 65, verses 13 and 14. Whereas Edom will be turned into an uninhabited wasteland, the Judean wilderness and arid land will bloom like Lebanon and Carmel.

The contrast is worked out in some detail. The wadis of Edom will be turned into pitch. Wadis of the Israelite land, now barren, will have a plentiful water supply.

Nettles and thistles are contrasted with reeds and rushes, plants that grow near water. Jackals and other unpleasant animals will take over in Edom. They will lose their habitat in the transformed Israelite wilderness.

There will be no way of travelling through Edom. There will be a highway for all except the richly unclean in the transformed land of Zion. Blenkinsop concludes, A close reading will confirm the detailed correspondence between the contrasting images.

Chapters 34 and 35 therefore form a coherent unit that juxtaposes the fate of hostile powers with the ultimate salvation of Zion, a juxtaposition found elsewhere in the book, especially in the last 11 chapters. The vision of the future here seems to look towards a greater, more eschatological horizon, a more general restoration of the creation, of which there are anticipations in time in such events as the return from exile in Babylon. The desert here, as John Oswald argues, should probably not be identified with any desert in particular.

It is rather a symbol of that which is barren and fruitless, lacking the means to sustain life. The Lord's coming and grace can transform the driest and least hospitable place into a verdant and beautiful garden that is filled with bounty. He can transform the lamenting

of his people into joyful song.

When the Lord arrives on the scene, the whole earth will take on a renewed and transfigured aspect. Lebanon, Carmel and Sharon, typically especially fruitful parts of the land, were described in chapter 33 verse 9. The land mourns and languishes. Lebanon is confounded and withers away.

Sharon is like a desert, and Bashan and Carmel shake off their leaves. Now, however, for their drought and mourning will come the rain of divine blessing and the joy of new life. The glory of Lebanon and the majesty of Carmel and Sharon that they will receive are here directly related to the glory and majesty of the Lord.

The glory of these lands are reflections of the Lord's smile upon them. As they see the Lord's splendor, they start to bear some small measure of his likeness. The people were earlier described as hopeless, despairing and fearful, having lost all energy and confidence. Verses 3 and 4 encourage them to lift up their downcast hearts, to strengthen their weakened limbs and to await with confidence the Lord's action in their situation.

His vengeance and recompense, described in verse 8 of the preceding chapter, is at hand. There is no need to be dismayed or to languish in fear any longer. Their deliverance is nigh.

When the Lord comes, disabilities will be miraculously healed. Those who were once incapacitated or disabled will arise with a surge of strength. The blind will see the death here.

Back in chapter 6 verses 9 and 10, the Lord had declared a judgment upon his people where they would lose their senses. Go and say to this people, keep on hearing but do not understand. Keep on seeing but do not perceive.

Make the heart of this people dull and their ears heavy and blind their eyes lest they see with their eyes and hear with their ears and understand with their hearts and turn and be healed. In the opening of eyes and ears, this judgment, among other things, is being reversed. Lame men will leap.

Mute men will sing, like babbling brooks bursting forth in a parched desert. Imagery of waters in the wilderness extends the theme of healing to include the land in addition to the people. Just as the people are filled with new life, so will their land be.

Once uninhabitable places will be made welcoming for dwelling, lush and well watered. Places that were once the haunt of scavenging beasts will become places of verdant foliage. Edom, the people devoted to destruction by the Lord, would have their land given over to wild animals and rendered impassable.

The reverse would happen to the people of the Lord. A highway would be created through the once desert lands, an image to which Isaiah returns in chapter 40 verses 3-5. A voice cries, And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.

Whereas the path down to Egypt for aid, described in the Oracle of the Beasts of the Negev, in chapter 30 verse 6, was dangerous and treacherous, this path is safe and certain. It is a way that belongs to the righteous. The unclean cannot walk on it, nor can the fools stumble upon it.

Upon that path, people will enjoy safety from all predators. Isaiah previously spoke of highways in chapter 11 verse 16, where he spoke of a highway for a remnant of exiles returning from Assyria, and in chapter 19 verse 23, where a highway between Egypt and Assyria was established for worshippers. Once again, this is a highway that leads to Zion, to the worship of the Lord.

We might also hear, as in those other places, reminders of the story of the Exodus and the journey through the wilderness to the Promised Land, the highway that the Lord is establishing is a highway for the redeemed of his people to return to Zion. Fittingly, this section of Isaiah ends with an eschatological image of the fullness of joy, of exiles returning and reuniting, of sorrow and sighing fleeing away, and of a glorious and glad assembly of song in the holy city. A question to consider, where do we see the New Testament referring to and using the imagery of this chapter? In Isaiah chapter 36 and following, we have the narrative of the Assyrian crisis in 701 BC.

Earlier in the reign of Hezekiah, in 722 BC, Shalmaneser V and Sargon II had defeated Hoshea the king of Israel, and in the process had put an end to the kingdom of Israel altogether. The natural question at this point was whether Judah would suffer the same fate. The text of Isaiah chapter 36-39 is largely identical to that of 2 Kings chapters 18-20.

The stories here are not arranged in chronological order. The events of chapters 38 and 39 largely precede those of chapters 36 and 37. Merodach Baladan, for instance, was not king of Babylon in 701 BC.

He had already been removed. Structurally, within the book of Isaiah, we can observe a juxtaposition of the story of Ahaz and the crisis of the Syro-Ephimite war, and the Assyrian crisis in 701 BC. Certain details in both of the narratives would bear out this association.

For instance, in chapter 7 verse 3, Isaiah was sent with his son to meet Ahaz at the end of the conduit of the upper pool on the highway to the washer's field, the same location as mentioned in chapter 36. This might invite us to compare and contrast the faith and the unbelief of King Hezekiah and King Ahaz respectively. Such a comparison and

contrast would underline one of the primary themes of the book of Isaiah, which concerns trusting the Lord over the nations.

The signs don't look good for Judah. Sennacherib successfully captures all of the fortified cities of Judah, 46 of them, and Hezekiah has to ask for mercy for him. He sends messengers to Sennacherib in Lachish.

Lachish was a heavily fortified city that was the second city of Judah to Jerusalem at this point. It might seem that Sennacherib was well underway to completely overrunning the nation. We have archaeological evidence of a vast Assyrian siege ramp that was set up against the city of Lachish.

Taking stones from a nearby quarry, they had erected this at one of the weakest points of the wall, and had clearly succeeded in taking down the city. This feat of great manpower and ingenuity was evidence of the unstoppable might and brilliance of the Assyrian war machine. Hezekiah and Judah hoped to be offered mercy in exchange for a grand tribute.

Hezekiah's payment of a tribute is recorded in Assyrian annals from the time. Several of Hezekiah's predecessors as King of Judah had raided the treasuries of the House of the Lord to pay tribute to a foreign king. Rehoboam had done it for Shishak, king of Egypt.

Asa had given money to Ben-Hadad of Syria to get him on his side against Beasha. Jehoash had given money to Haziel of Syria. During Amaziah's reign, Jehoash of Israel had broken down the walls of Jerusalem and taken away much of the treasure of the temple.

Ahaz, Hezekiah's father, had also raided the treasuries of the temple to give money to Tiglath-Pileser of Assyria. Hezekiah attempted the same thing with Sennacherib, giving the silver of the House of the Lord and all of the gold from the doorposts. Not only is Judah now standing in the very greatest jeopardy, but Hezekiah's action and response could be seen to be a troubling one.

He's taken tribute that has been given to the Lord and is handing it over to a foreign invader. The hearer of the text might wonder whether he is actually placing his hope in the king of Assyria and in making terms with him rather than in the Lord his God. The king of Assyria sends the Rabshakeh from Lachish, the second city of Judah, that has been conquered by the king of Assyria.

The Rabshakeh functions as the mouthpiece of his master. He is a high official with the ability to speak in the Judean tongue, which is helpful in this particular situation. He also seems to have some insight into the state of Judah and the nature of its religious belief, among other things.

From what we learn from Assyrian annals, a great number of soldiers from Judah had

either surrendered or defected at this point. The Assyrians could have gained a lot of intelligence about the internal affairs of the nation of Judah from such persons. The Rabshakeh's speech is perfectly designed to demoralize the people, speaking to Eliakim who is over the household, who has taken the office that was formerly occupied by Shebna, who accompanies him along with Joah, the recorder.

The Rabshakeh presents them with the big question, in whom do you trust? Given Hezekiah's actions in Philistia, it may seem that he is trusting in Egypt. Yet Egypt is far from powerful enough to act as an effective ally, even if it were reliable and kept its promises. Lessons should have been learned from its failure to act on behalf of Ashdod.

Leaning on Egypt would actually hurt Judah rather than helping them. The Lord has earlier warned Judah against such an alliance. As the Assyrians have conquered cities throughout Judah, they have probably noticed signs of a recent revolution in the religious life of the nation.

They have seen the ruins of former shrines, seen pillars that have been torn down. They have recognized something significant has occurred and probably gained intelligence from Judean defectors, discovering that Hezekiah has broken down all of the high places in the pillars. This presents the Rabshakeh with a very effective demoralizing argument that he can present to the people in Judah.

They have clearly offended their God, the Lord, and He has now turned upon them. The Rabshakeh mocks them for their inability to assemble an effective military force. Even if he were to give them 2,000 horses, they would not be able to put riders upon them.

Why then would they look to Egypt for horses and chariots when they lack the men and the skills to use them? The Rabshakeh goes even further in his argument. Not only has the Lord abandoned His people Judah, turning against them because they have abandoned His proper worship, the king of Assyria has been commissioned by the Lord Himself against them. It is by the Lord's word that He has gone up to attack Jerusalem.

The officials of Hezekiah are naturally greatly dismayed by these words, even more so because they have spoken in the hearing of the regular soldiers on the wall in a language that they can understand. The speech of the Rabshakeh is not meant merely for Hezekiah and his officials. It is also for the more general population.

It is designed to demoralize them. The Rabshakeh moves on to develop further arguments that they should not trust in Hezekiah nor trust in the Lord, allowing Hezekiah to persuade them that the Lord would deliver them. Neither Hezekiah nor the Lord would deliver them from the hand of the king of Assyria.

Along with this demoralizing message, the Rabshakeh gives a different piece of propaganda, the message that there is hope, if they would only surrender to the king of

Assyria. If they would only surrender, each one of them would eat of his own vine and eat of his own fig tree. Each one of them would drink the water of his own cistern.

This language is usually associated with the very positive visions of the Lord giving rest to His people in the land, so that they all enjoy their own property and have untroubled relations with their own wives. Here, however, in an almost satanic fashion, the Rabshakeh takes up the words of the Lord, presenting the promise, but twisting it significantly. He presents them with the promise of bringing them into a new land, a land of grain and wine, a land of bread and vineyards.

The message here is that the king of Assyria is the one that they should look to, not the Lord. Indeed, the gods of other nations have not helped them. Why should the God of Judah help it? Once again, there is a parody here of the words of the Lord.

Who among all of the gods of the land have delivered their lands out of my hand, that the Lord should deliver Jerusalem out of my hand? This mirrors the language of places like Deuteronomy 4, verse 34. Or has any god ever attempted to go and take a nation for himself from the midst of another nation, by deeds of terror, all of which the Lord your God did for you in Egypt before your eyes? In such a manner, the Rabshakeh is sowing doubt and fear and demoralization. Judah can't trust its king.

Judah can't trust its god. The God of Judah is either on the side of Assyria or a helpless bystander, unable to intervene to save his people from the hand of the king of Assyria. On the other hand, if the people do surrender, the king of Assyria will bring them into a glorious land.

He will be their saviour and deliverer. They will look to him for aid. The king had commanded the people not to answer.

They must hold their nerve. They must resist the temptation. And they all obey him.

They are silent in response. But Eliakim, Shevna and Joah go to the king and they have their clothes torn as they deliver the message to Hezekiah. A question to consider.

Can you see any differences between the account of Isaiah chapter 36 and that of 2 Kings chapter 18? Isaiah chapter 37 continues the account that began in chapter 36. Sennacherib, the king of Assyria, invaded Judah and sent his representative, the Rabshakeh, to confront King Hezekiah and his men. Sennacherib successfully overthrew 46 cities of Judah.

Hezekiah had paid Sennacherib a great amount in tribute, hoping that he would call off his invasion before he overthrew Jerusalem too. However, that plan had failed and now Sennacherib was expecting Jerusalem to surrender to him. Chapters 36 to 39 of the Book of Isaiah are largely identical to chapters 18 to 20 of 2 Kings.

Both sets of chapters narrate the events of 701 BC and also Hezekiah's illness and restoration and the visit of the Babylonian envoys. The question of which of these two texts should be given the priority has been debated by many scholars. These are not the only chapters of 2 Kings that are largely repeated at some point in the prophetic material.

Jeremiah chapter 52 seems to be largely drawn from 2 Kings chapter 25. The account of 2 Kings includes some details that are not found in the account of Isaiah. In particular, chapter 18 verses 14 to 16 and Hezekiah's payment of tribute is not found in the account of Isaiah.

King Hezekiah's payment of tribute is also confirmed by Sennacherib's prison. Found on the site of a palace at Nineveh in 1830, Sennacherib's prison confirms and also fills out some of the details of the biblical account. In support of Isaiah's account being the original one, we might observe the parallels between earlier chapters in the book and this one.

In particular, chapters 7 to 9 and the events surrounding the Syro-Ephraimite crisis during the reign of King Ahaz, during which time Isaiah also addressed the king. Both accounts mention the conduit of the upper pool on the highway to the washer's field. Both of the kings are told not to fear.

Both are given a sign and we have the repeated expression, the zeal of the Lord of Hosts will do this. This expression is also used in chapter 9 verse 7. The effect of all of this is to juxtapose the two kings and the two invasions that they experienced. In both of the two crises, there is the question of where their dependents will be.

Upon the Lord of Hosts or in looking to foreign nations. In such a manner, the position of this text within the larger book of Isaiah furthers some of the core themes within the book of Isaiah more generally. At this point, there is little that Hezekiah and Judah can do to resist the Assyrian invasion.

They have lost most of their fortified cities. They cannot muster a large military force. Egypt does not promise to be an effective or reliable ally.

The Assyrians are seemingly not satisfied with the payment of tribute. It seems most likely that Judah and Jerusalem will suffer the same fate as the Northern Kingdom and its capital Samaria had in 722 BC. The message delivered by the Rabshakeh in the previous chapter is brought to King Hezekiah by his officials.

Hezekiah is quite understandably deeply dismayed but his response here is the right one. He turns to the Lord, tears his clothes, goes to the temple of the Lord and then sends messengers to Isaiah the prophet of the Lord. King Hezekiah describes the situation to the prophet Isaiah as akin to the situation of a woman in labour who is trying



to bring herself to birth but lacks the strength to do so.

He reports the claims of the Rabshakeh and his master the king of Assyria to Isaiah, presenting them as not only a challenge to his own reign as the king of Judah but also as a challenge to the Lord's own honour. The king of Assyria has mocked the living God. He has claimed that the Lord is not able to deliver his people and indeed that the king of Assyria was sent by the Lord to attack the people of Judah.

Hezekiah requests the prayers of Isaiah on their behalf. The Lord responds then to King Hezekiah through Isaiah in a message paralleled and contrasted with the message of the Rabshakeh. The servants of the king of Assyria have blasphemed the Lord.

Hezekiah should not be afraid of the Rabshakeh's words as the Lord will act against Assyria and on behalf of his people. The Lord promises Hezekiah deliverance, a deliverance that would have required considerable faith to believe under the circumstances. All of the signs seem to be pointing against them.

When the Rabshakeh returns he finds that the king of Assyria has left Lachish and is fighting against Livnah. Then Sennacherib the king of Assyria hears a rumour concerning the king of Cush who has set out to fight him. Terhaka was probably not the king at this time but the crown prince, around 20 years of age.

During the 25th dynasty Egypt was ruled over by Cushites. Once again Sennacherib sends messengers to Hezekiah in Jerusalem. He directs Hezekiah's attention to the many lands that he has subdued.

He had defeated their peoples and their gods were not able to save them. The Lord, the God of Judah, he argues, will be no different. Hezekiah's response once again is to turn to the Lord.

He takes the letter, spreads it out before the Lord and sought the Lord in prayer. For all of the bluster and pride of Sennacherib, the Lord is still the God of all of the earth. He is the one who created all.

He is the one who is sovereign over all nations. He has not been brought down from his throne. He is still enthroned above the cherubim.

The empty words of Sennacherib are directed not just against the people of Judah but against the Lord. Hezekiah calls the Lord to pay attention to them. The kings of Assyria have indeed laid waste all these other lands.

But they served idols, false gods, gods that are no gods. By contrast, the God of Judah is the true God and he can act against Assyria. He can deliver his people.

The Lord responds to Hezekiah's prayer by the words of Isaiah the son of Amoz. In

Isaiah's prophecy, the virgin daughter of Zion, Jerusalem, is described as wagging her head, scorning the reviling and the mocking of the king of Assyria, not taking them seriously. The king of Assyria boasts in his power and his might and the many great deeds that he has done.

He has felled great nations like Cedars and Cypresses on the mountains. He has caused his might to spread to all parts of the world, even up to Egypt. Yet the Lord is the one who determined all of this long ago.

It is the Lord who oversees and directs the affairs of men according to his purposes. The king of Assyria thinks that it is by his power that the fortified cities have been brought down. But that would never have taken place had it not been the Lord's will and determination that it should.

The king of Assyria rages against the Lord, proud in his own power. But the Lord can bring him down. The Lord can put his hook in his nose and his bit in his mouth.

And against all of the odds, the Lord will turn him back the way that he came. The Lord declares that he will give Hezekiah a sign to confirm all of this to him. Using agricultural imagery, the Lord describes a situation where after complete devastation of the land, within three years of such devastation, Judah will have placed roots down into the land again.

The Lord is going to restore them. This will be accomplished by the zeal of the Lord. He is zealous for his great name.

He will not allow his people to be snatched from him. He will not allow his name to be blasphemed. The king of Assyria will not be successful in his attempts to take the city of Jerusalem.

There will not even be an arrow shot there. Or he will not come up against it with the shield or a siege mount. He will be sent back, tail between his legs, the way that he came.

God defended the city for the sake of his own great name and for the sake of his servant David, to whom he had made promises and given a covenant. That night the angel of the Lord went and struck down 185,000 of the Assyrians. Much as the Lord had delivered his people from Egypt, and the destroying angel had struck down the firstborn of the Egyptians, so the angel of the Lord struck down the Assyrians.

Zennekerib returned to Assyria, lived at Nineveh, and there was killed by two of his sons, ironically in the house of Nisrach, his god. He mocked the Lord who was able to deliver his people in the most miraculous of ways, and yet his own god cannot defend him in his very own house. In Zennekerib, another enemy of the Lord is defeated and humiliated, and the faith of the people of the Lord is vindicated.

A question to consider, how can the juxtaposition of Ahaz and Hezekiah within the book of Isaiah help us better to understand the theological import of their respective crises? As in the case of the preceding two chapters concerning the Assyrian crisis of 701 BC, much of the material of Isaiah chapters 38 and 39 is also found in 2 Kings, these two chapters having extensive overlap with the material of 2 Kings chapter 20. If we believe, as most commentators do, that chapters 36 and 37 relate to the events of 701 BC, rather than to an earlier attack upon Jerusalem, it would seem that both in 2 Kings and in Isaiah, the narrative material is not in chronological order. This is indicated by the text itself, which promises the deliverance of the city and Hezekiah from the king of Assyria, strongly implying that this is prior to 701 BC, at a time when the Assyrian threat was imminent.

The visit of the envoys of Merodach Baladan, king of Babylon, also almost certainly did not occur after the events of 701 BC. Merodach Baladan had taken the throne of Babylon in 722 BC and had secured Babylon's independence from Assyria until removed in 710 BC. In 703 BC he returned from Elam, incited a rebellion against Assyria in Babylonia again, but was removed within the year.

Although he had managed to flee to Elam again, it is highly unlikely that he was sending envoys to Hezekiah in Jerusalem any time after 701 BC. As chapter 39 seems to be connected to chapter 38, as the illness of Hezekiah seems to have occasioned the sending of the envoys, we also have to consider the fact that Hezekiah was told that he would have 15 more years to live. This clearly presents a constraint for our dating, although as there are wildly varying dates given as the most likely year of Hezekiah's death, it might not help us as much as we might expect it to.

A further detail is the introductory phrase, In those days, in this chapter, which, taken with the allusion to the imminence of the threat of the Assyrians to Jerusalem, weighs in favour of a date nearer to 701 BC. On balance, my inclination is to date Hezekiah's illness to around 704 to 703 BC. We are still left with the question of why the chronology of the text is disrupted at this point, in 2 Kings, 2 Chronicles and Isaiah.

In the case of the Book of Isaiah, it is helpful to consider the structure of the book more generally. The accounts of chapters 36-39 have several parallels to the earlier accounts concerning Ahaz, Hezekiah's father, in chapters 7 and following. The two kings face similar crises, the first in the Syro-Ephraimite crisis of the 730s, and the second in the Assyrian crisis of 701 BC, but their responses to those crises are contrasted.

In both cases, they are given signs by the Lord. In Ahaz's case, the signs are those of new birth. In Hezekiah's case, the sign represents the turning back of time and his deliverance from illness and death.

In both of these cases, the signs to the kings also symbolise the fate of their kingdom. In Isaiah, the events of chapter 39 also anticipate the latter part of the book, which focuses

upon Babylon, making it a very natural seam at that point in the text. The city is under threat, but the king is also seriously ill, at the point of death.

As if the severity of his illness were not enough, the Lord sends Isaiah to Hezekiah to confirm the fact of his forthcoming death. He will not recover, and his nation is on the brink of being overrun by the Assyrians. The king is expecting death at one of the most critical times in the nation's history.

He would have to leave the reins of the nation in the hands of his son Manasseh, a man who proved wicked for much of his life, although some commentators question whether he yet had an heir. The symbolic relationship between the physical body of the king and the body politic has been much explored by writers and poets and theorised by theologians and political thinkers, perhaps most notably in the work of Ernst Kantorowicz, who wrote on the subject in *The King's Two Bodies*. The illness of King Hezekiah is a symbol of the ailing of the kingdom and its nearness to death.

Can the kingdom be delivered from the exile that seemingly awaits it? Hezekiah's response to the Lord's announcement is to turn his face to the wall and to seek the Lord's reprieve. He calls upon the Lord to consider the way that he has walked before him faithfully. Like his forefather David, he has walked before the Lord with a whole heart, seeking to do what is good in the sight of the Lord.

After the idolatry of the reign of Ahaz, he has sought to re-establish true worship in the land and to root out all the idolatry and false worship that had become entrenched there. As the account of 2 Kings informs us, even before Isaiah had left the courts of the palace, the word of the Lord came to him, sending him back to Hezekiah with the message that his prayer had been heard. The Lord addresses Hezekiah as the God of David his father.

He will be healed and restored. 2 Kings adds the detail that on the third day he will be raised up to go into the house of the Lord. This won't merely be a reprieve of short duration.

The Lord will add 15 years to his life. As the King symbolizes the nation, this deliverance is not just for Hezekiah as a private individual. It is also for him as the representative of the nation and the city.

The city will also be delivered, delivered from the hand of the King of Assyria. God's commitment to the city is for the sake of David his servant and also for his own namesake. He has placed his name in Zion's temple and he is jealous for its holiness.

2 Kings 20 8-11 give a longer account of the sign given to Hezekiah, making clear that the sign was one concerning which Hezekiah was given a choice. And Hezekiah said to Isaiah, What shall be the sign that the Lord will heal me, and that I shall go up to the house of the Lord on the third day? And Isaiah said, This shall be the sign to you from the

Lord, that the Lord will do the thing that he has promised. Shall the shadow go forward ten steps, or go back ten steps? And Hezekiah answered, It is an easy thing for the shadow to lengthen ten steps.

Rather let the shadow go back ten steps. And Isaiah the prophet called to the Lord, and he brought the shadow back ten steps, by which it had gone down on the steps of Ahaz. King Ahaz had rejected a sign when it was offered to him back in chapter 7, in a false show of piety.

His son Hezekiah gladly receives his. The nature of the steps in question are disputed. It is not said that the steps represent ours, or that they are part of a sundial.

The steps may have been steps that led up to the altar, or in some part of the palace. Their connection with Ahaz might also recall Hezekiah's father, heightening the comparisons and contrasts that are being drawn here. As Peter Lightheart observes, the words for stairs here are connected with ascent, and there are themes of ascent and descent throughout this chapter, descent to Sheol, and then lifting up from illness.

For this reason, among others, the sign would seem to be a fitting one. Within both the sign and the healing of Hezekiah, we can discern a deeper message. People's times, even those of kings and nations, are in the hands of the Lord.

He can bring a person or a nation back from the brink of death, and no one can stay His hand. When facing the prospect of imminent national or personal death, He is the one to turn to, rather than resorting to lesser powers. The writing of Hezekiah in response to his healing, recorded for us in verses 9-20, is not found in either 2 Kings or 2 Chronicles.

Indeed, 2 Chronicles presents Hezekiah in a rather less flattering light. In chapter 32, verses 24-26. In those days, Hezekiah became sick and was at the point of death, and he prayed to the Lord and he answered him and gave him a sign.

But Hezekiah did not make return according to the benefit done to him, for his heart was proud. Therefore wrath came upon him and Judah and Jerusalem. But Hezekiah humbled himself for the pride of his heart, both he and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, so that the wrath of the Lord did not come upon them in the days of Hezekiah.

Hezekiah's writing includes elements of lament and also of thanksgiving. He bemoans the fact that he has been cut off in the middle of his life. The land of the living is the place where the praise of the Lord and all of the things that really matter are found, and yet he is going to be consigned to Sheol, exiled from the special presence of the Lord, and no longer have communion with other human beings.

Human life is fragile and transient. Hezekiah compares his existence to a shepherd's tent that can be pulled up, or like a piece of fabric that is removed by a weaver from the loom when it is finished. It seems that the Lord himself is against Hezekiah, and yet it is to the

Lord that he calls out in his despair.

Recognizing the Lord's hand in his distress and the way that the Lord is speaking to him through his suffering is the means by which Hezekiah is able to turn the corner. Life and health is ultimately found through the Lord's speech to people. Men live by the words that proceed from the mouth of the Lord.

As the Lord deals with Hezekiah through his illness and suffering, he restores Hezekiah to a greater health than he had previously. Through the word of his prophet Isaiah, the Lord had charged Hezekiah to set his house in order, to prepare himself for death, and as Hezekiah did that, the Lord healed him and restored him. In particular, his sins were forgiven.

His physical restoration came with a spiritual one too. Hezekiah began this writing by speaking about the way that the dead are cut off from the praise of the Lord. And he ends by returning to the same theme.

Having been delivered from death, he will devote himself to the praise of the Lord and the passing on of the goodness of the Lord to his children after him. As the redeemed king, he is going to lead the people in the assembly at the temple in praise of the Lord. The chapter concludes with a couple of details that refer back to the earlier narrative of the sign and Hezekiah's healing.

Here we discover that Hezekiah had a boil, perhaps connected with the plague or something like that. The application of figs was a known form of treatment of certain ailments, and we need not presume that it is some strange prophetic sign in itself. We should also consider that having such a skin condition might also have barred him from the worship of the Lord, even if he was healthy enough to attend otherwise.

Returning to the sign here has the effect of bracketing the entire account with the action of the Lord. It also recalls the structure of the preceding chapter. A question to consider, what should we make of the very pessimistic view of the afterlife in Hezekiah's writing, as in many other parts of the Old Testament, such as Job or the Psalms? Isaiah chapter 39 concludes the narrative section that began in chapter 36.

It is also the final chapter of what most scholars regard as Proto or First Isaiah. While most of the chapters up to chapter 39 are generally attributed to the prophet Isaiah, scholars differ concerning the chapters that follow. Theologically conservative commentators typically attribute the entire book to the authorship of Isaiah, although this is very much a minority position in the field.

Whatever our position on the composition and authorship of the book of Isaiah, however, this chapter is very clearly part of an important seam in the book. Chapters 7-12 were centred on the crisis of the Syro-Ephraimite War in the 730s BC. Chapters 13-39, with

Oracles against the Nations, against Judah, and the narrative of chapters 36 and following, focused on the Assyrian crisis faced by the wider region in the years leading up to 701 BC.

However, from chapter 40 to the end of the book, the prophecy addresses a situation 150 years later, with the return from exile in Babylon, even though at the time of the events in chapter 39, the Babylonian exile is well over 100 years away. We could perhaps compare this to speaking about the end of World War I in the midst of the Napoleonic Wars in the early 1800s. While many of the principal actors would be the same, the world and its power relations had changed considerably in the intervening century.

This underscores, first, the challenge of reading the book of Isaiah as a unified text, and second, the added challenge for any who want to maintain the traditional position that Isaiah is the author of the entire book. In addressing these questions, we should recall the telescopic character of much of the prophecy to this point, where earlier prophesied events function as reality-filled promises of later ones. For instance, the events of the 730s anticipate the deliverance of 701 BC, and in these deliverances, the later deliverance from Babylon is foreshadowed.

Similarly, we have seen nations and cities stand for more than merely themselves. Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Tyre, Moab and Edom have all functioned as figures of realities that exceed themselves in Isaiah to this point, or as representatives of larger groups of nations. When reading Isaiah, we should be careful not to miss such connections between events and figures.

Such connections invite the hearer to consider various situations and characters in relation to each other, to recognize deeper patterns and a unity in history. Isaiah can often feel like a book that introduces its great themes in more fragmentary and abbreviated forms in connection with near events, while constantly building up expectation and longing in its hearers for fuller and stronger expressions of them. In the latter part of the book, the great themes themselves come to the fore, and the particularities of the history recedes into the background.

At several points already, we have seen how prophecies could do double service, speaking not only to events in the later years of the 8th century and early years of the 7th, but also to a situation of Babylonian dominance in the 6th century, and even beyond that to a more final eschatological horizon. The people of God have long read scripture in this way, recognizing that prophetic words can send forth sparks that cross the vast gulfs of the centuries, and speak with a living urgency to times many years distant from those into which they were first spoken. Considering the fact that Assyria was the dominant power in the region at the time, we have observed the strangeness of the prominence that was given to Babylon in the Oracles against the Nations, which began with Babylon

in chapters 13 and 14, and also focused on Babylon in chapter 21, while saying relatively little directly concerning Assyria.

Some scholars have made the case that the king of Babylon in chapters 13 and 14 really is the king of Assyria, who also claimed that title. If this were the case, it presses the question of why the prophecy presents Assyria under the guise of Babylon upon us. However, if the prophecy is addressing two distinct yet related horizons, most likely the sacking of Babylon in 689 BC at the hands of the Assyrians, and the capture of Babylon by Cyrus and the Medo-Persians in 539 BC, then the attention given to Babylon makes a lot more sense.

Even though it is allowing us to see the action within its frame, the camera may not be focusing upon the player currently with the ball, because it wants the watcher to follow the player that will later take possession of it, against whom the critical tackles will occur further down the field. The Oracles against the Nations begin with Babylon in chapters 13 and 14, and in chapter 39 at the end of this greater section of the book, we return to Babylon once more. If there were ominous forebodings of the later Babylonian exile, in this chapter the future threat that Babylon will present becomes more explicit.

The material in this chapter, like the material of the preceding three chapters, is largely identical to material found in 2 Kings chapter 18-20, in this case in chapter 20 verses 12-19. As we have already noted in our study of the preceding chapter, the material of this chapter is put out of chronological sequence. The events of this chapter most likely occurred in 703 BC, a few years prior to the invasion of the Assyrians.

Meredach Baladan would soon be removed from the throne of Babylon, the rebellion in Babylon ended by the Assyrians. When we consider the larger structure of the Book of Isaiah, the placing of this and the preceding chapter out of chronological sequence makes a lot more sense. Babylon's prominence in this chapter presents a very neat segue into the second part of the book.

It also, with chapter 13, provides bookends for the larger Oracles concerning the Nations and Judah. Besides a sign of friendship from one nation to another, the visit of the Babylonian envoys is probably for the purpose of forming an alliance against the power of Assyria in the region. Hezekiah could have benefited from a northern ally and would be much more confident fighting against the Assyrians, with Egypt to the south and Babylon to the north.

Nevertheless, as we have seen from the prophecies in the book to this point, Judah's trust in the nations is a dangerous thing. Rather, they should look to the Lord and trust in Him, as He is the one who will be their deliverer. The Lord sends the prophet Isaiah to Hezekiah to give him a dismaying message about the Babylonians.

Hezekiah has shown the Babylonians all around his house, and all that he has shown



them will one day be carried out into Babylon. Nothing will be left. The whole city will be plundered.

Indeed, some of Hezekiah's own descendants, whether his immediate sons or some of his later descendants, would also be carried into Babylon. Hezekiah's response seems rather selfish. He acknowledges the word of the Lord is good and just, but he takes more concern for the peace and security of his own days, with seemingly little concern for the well-being of the nation and his dynasty after his death.

Nevertheless, the portrayal of Hezekiah in this chapter may not be as negative as some suppose. Peter Lighthouse writes, The final vision of Isaiah is that the Gentiles will bring Judah's brothers, like a minka or tribute, to the holy mountain of Jerusalem. Chapter 66 verses 19 to 20 As Lighthouse notes, the message of Isaiah implies the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple that is to come.

However, in the larger frame of Isaiah, this is not all that is in view. He continues, But to grasp this fully, we need to realize that Babylon is going to play a different role in Israel's history than Assyria did. Assyria was merely a hammer and an axe, merely an instrument and tool for Yahweh to judge and discipline his people.

Babylon is going to be something different. Babylon and the empires that follow it are going to provide refuge for the people of God. The treasure of the temple and the tasks of the Davidic kings are going to be taken up by Babylon, then Persia, Greece and Rome.

Cyrus, Isaiah says later, will be the anointed king, a second Solomon who builds a second temple. Lighthouse continues to make the point that the lesson of the preceding chapter is that just as the king could be brought to the point of death and then restored, so Judah could be brought to the point of death and restored. Not just in the Assyrian crisis, but also in the coming Babylonian crisis.

As they are brought down to the very grave of Sheol in exile, they will be raised up again. And this time, as the rest of the book of Isaiah makes clear, rather than plundering Zion, the empires of the nations will bring their riches into the city of Jerusalem. A question to consider, how might Babylon in its relationship to King Hezekiah be compared to Assyria in its relationship to King Ahaz earlier in the book? In Isaiah chapter 40 we move into a new section of the book.

Until chapter 12 of the book, the text especially focused upon the crisis of the Syro-Ephraimite war during the reign of King Ahaz in the 730s BC and the years prior to it. The oracles against the nations and against Judah that followed them in chapters 13-35 had the wider Assyrian crisis as their focus. This climaxed for Judah in 701 BC when Sennacherib came up against Jerusalem, an event recorded in chapter 36 and 37.

In the latter half of the book, however, the book speaks concerning a very different

situation, where the dominant power is no longer Assyria, but seems to be Babylon, where Judah is in exile, but return is promised under Cyrus and the Medo-Persian Empire. However, even though Babylon and Cyrus do come into view more directly at certain points, the material of the rest of Isaiah is overwhelmingly far more general in its visions of judgement and restoration, with sparse details to tether it to specific historical and personal reference. In this and other respects, something like chapter 35 is perhaps the closest comparison to it within the first 39 chapters of the book.

After chapter 39, Isaiah's name is no longer mentioned and he no longer features as a character as he did in various of the earlier narrative sections. Specific historical references and allusions to specific kings and times being addressed, or references to dates at which things happened, which we find at a few points in the first 30 chapters, are also lacking. Scholars commonly further argue that there is a discernible change in the style.

The weight of these facts probably should not be overstated. For instance, besides the superscriptions that open the first two chapters and the narrative sections of chapter 7 and chapters 37-39, Isaiah's name is only found in a superscription in chapter 13 and in two adjacent verses in chapter 20. Furthermore, those arguing for a shift to a far more poetic style after chapter 39 often also argue that certain material from the first 39 chapters should be attributed to a later hand, given its similarity to material of the concluding 27 chapters of the book.

In particular, as the gaze of the Prophet moved beyond his more immediate historical horizon and regarded a more eschatological and archetypal vista of salvation in various passages in the earlier part of the book, he seemed to employ a similar poetic and figurative style. The suggestion that there might have been two or more authors of the Book of Isaiah is not a new position, it has been around for at least 850 years. However, the theory of a first and second, or proto- and deutero-Isaiah, later expanded to include a third or trito-Isaiah, typically seen as running from chapter 56 to 66, became dominant in large measure on account of the rise of higher criticism.

Higher criticism's instincts tended towards radical fragmentation of texts into different sources and forms, and could treat texts as untrustworthy witnesses, betraying the political and partisan interests of those who wrote and edited them. Besides this, on account of their liberal unbelief in predictive prophecy, many could not accept, for instance, that Isaiah could foretell the name of Cyrus in Isaiah 44, verse 28, over 150 years prior to Cyrus' decree. It is important to recognise that the arguments against Isaiah's authorship of the entire book are not simply based upon such unbelief.

Even in the case of the declaration of Cyrus' role in the return, it is not immediately obvious that the texts of Isaiah chapters 44 and 45 read most naturally as a prediction of a figure nearly a century before his birth. Likewise, even if we believe in predictive

prophecy, we still need to explain why a prophet would seemingly address a radically transformed situation of around 150 years later. In recent decades, commentators on Isaiah from the school of the canonical approach, such as Brevard Childs and Christopher Seitz, have reasserted the importance of the unity of the completed text of Isaiah in its canonical form, so that this position now enjoys a lot of respect within mainstream scholarship.

While they hold to the presence of different sources from different historical periods in Isaiah, they maintain that the unified book itself must be given priority, and that it is manifestly a single piece of literature, with 2nd Isaiah bearing the hallmarks of being formed in terms of 1st Isaiah, for instance. Even if Isaiah was not the author of the entire book named after him, the entire book is a unified work of literature. If traditional higher criticism were like treating the Bible as a jigsaw to be disassembled, its pieces gathered into the different sources of contrasting colours and the different forms of contrasting shapes, the canonical approach is the gentle reminder that the pieces ultimately belong together in the completed puzzle.

Nevertheless, many conservative scholars are not quite so prepared as Childs and Seitz and others to deny Isaiah's authorship of the entire book. It is difficult to discern the intended addressee of the later part of the book. While the future foretold would be most directly relevant to the exiles of Judah in Babylon in the years leading up to 539 BC, we should recall that Isaiah had foretold the rise of Babylon and Judah's captivity to Babylon in chapter 39, which immediately precedes this section.

That future was already a projected event in the consciousness of the hearers of Isaiah at the end of the 8th century BC. Consequently, a prophetic projection of deliverance and restoration through and from that exile in a much less specific and more poetic form would not be out of place. Isaiah could meaningfully prophesy about that future to people in his own day.

Furthermore, much as the form in which the oracles of imminent judgement in the earlier part of the book foreshadowed the future judgement that would come upon Babylon over 150 years later, so the more abstract and poetic accounts of judgement and redemption would have enabled faithful people at the time of Isaiah to recognise themselves in the projected experience of their descendants. Alec Matia, in making his case for Isaiah's authorship of the entire book, observed details such as the references to idol making that seemed to presume the context of Palestine where suitable trees for idol carving could be obtained. As for the specifying of Cyrus' name, there is no reason in principle why this should be rejected.

King Josiah's name was predicted centuries before his birth in 1 Kings chapter 13. Besides, considering the great emphasis that the later chapters of Isaiah place upon the Lord as the one who is the master of history, who declares the future before it unfolds,

the power of these chapters to address, not merely people of Isaiah's day, but also those of a time yet to come, might not be quite so out of keeping. In many respects, arguments for Isaiah's authorship of the entire book are on a stronger academic footing now than they were throughout the past century, as mainstream scholarship rediscovers the theological and ideological unity of the entire book.

However, there remain difficult questions for such a position, and where there are not underlying theological commitments holding them to single authorship, it is not surprising that some commentators, who are otherwise theologically conservative and believe in predictive prophecy, would nonetheless be unpersuaded that Isaiah authored the entire prophetic book of his name. This is a debate that is not yet over. In chapters 40 to 48, the theological themes of the Lord's steadfast love for his people, his commitment to save them, and his power over all other so-called gods, come to the fore.

The death of exile would come, but it would not be the end of the story. The Lord would bring his people back to life after their national death. In the process, he would demonstrate his identity and supremacy as the sovereign over creation, history, the nations, and all of their gods.

Here, the theological heart of Isaiah's prophecy comes into view. This, above all things, is a book about God. As John Oswald notes, there are several things in chapter 40 that recall the commissioning of Isaiah in chapter 6. He writes, Sounds like the response, How long? in chapter 6 verse 11.

Finally, the announcement of good news to the cities of Judah, chapter 40 verse 9, looks very much like a reversal of the command in chapter 6 verse 11 to speak the word of God until the cities lie in waste. Reading these two chapters in terms of each other then, we might hear an answer to Isaiah's sorrowful question, How long? back in chapter 6. In chapter 40's assurance, that the time of judgment has passed and that restoration is at hand. The Lord loves his people and will restore them in his mercy, grace, and righteousness as the God who keeps his covenant.

The great covenant formula, I will be your God and you shall be my people, is gently alluded to in the tenderness of the chapter's opening words of encouragement and reassurance. The Lord has not disowned his people, but he will redeem them for himself. A new commission is given to messengers of God, a declaration of peace, forgiveness, and then of return.

The exile was the work of the Lord, dealing with the sins of his wayward and wicked people, but now their sins have been dealt with, they're forgiven, pardoned, and released. Again the messenger in verse 3 is uncertain, but his message is a joyous one. Earlier parts of Isaiah spoke of fruitful lands being reduced to wilderness under the Lord's judgment, but now a way is being provided through the wilderness, a way for the Lord's return, presumably at the head of a vast company of his returning people.

We've already had an intimation of this return through the wilderness to Zion, back in chapter 35 verses 8-10. The way back through the wilderness suggests that a new exodus is occurring, much as the exodus from Egypt. The path of return from Babylon did not pass through the wilderness as that from Egypt did, but the path of return was most definitely through a figurative wilderness.

A vast work of terraforming is described, valleys being lifted up, mountains and hills made low, and a levelled path being spread before the Lord, the returning king, all obstacles removed from his route. Again we might here recall the great eschatological vision of Isaiah chapter 2 verses 2-4. The lifting up of the valleys and the lowering of the mountains, much like the lifting up of the mountain of Zion over the other mountains, speaks to the Lord's radical transformation of the powers of the world, humbling those who are lifted up and lifting up the humble.

When the Lord returns, his glory will be seen by all, decisively demonstrating his identity. While this clearly looks to the return from Babylon, it no less clearly looks beyond that to a more complete and final demonstration of the Lord's uniqueness in history. In verse 6 the voice of verse 3 cries out again, but now to summon another to cry out with it, perhaps the prophet himself.

The message is one of frailty and transience, comparing flesh to grass that withers, and flowers whose beauty fades when the spirit of the Lord blows upon them. A similar message to passages like Psalm 90. This is not the first time that we've seen this message in Isaiah.

He had to remind Ahaz that, beyond the terrifying threat of Israel and the Arameans, were merely two frail human beings, Rezan of Damascus and Pekah the son of Remaliah. He had a similar message in chapter 31 verse 3 to men of Judah looking to Egypt for aid. Man is weak, even in his imagined power.

Only the word of the Lord will stand forever. True security and certainty can only be known by those who live by faith in that word, rather than depending upon the things of sight. The Lord's promise will not fail.

Zion herself is summoned to take on the part of a herald of good news, of the gospel. The message of the Lord's return to Zion, coming as the mighty warrior, victorious over all of his enemies, with great spoils to deliver to his people. He is also coming as the tender shepherd of his harried and scattered flock.

He will gather, restore, and tend to them as a gentle and good shepherd. In Isaiah chapter 52 verses 7 to 10, we will later return to the themes of these verses. How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news, who publishes peace, who brings good news of happiness, who publishes salvation, who says to Zion, your God reigns, the voice of your watchmen.

They lift up their voice, together they sing for joy, for eye to eye they see the return of the Lord to Zion. Break forth together in singing, you waste places of Jerusalem. For the Lord has comforted his people, he has redeemed Jerusalem.

The Lord has bared his holy arm before the eyes of all the nations, and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God. Facing powers such as the Arameans in the northern kingdom of Israel, then the Assyrians, and then the even greater power of Babylon, the people of the Lord might have wondered whether the Lord was powerful enough to deliver them. Was their God's might sufficient to deliver them from such great foes? These questions would have become even more pronounced in the grave of exile, uprooted from their land, with no realistic prospect of return in sight.

In the teeth of such opposition, Isaiah's message is one of a God whose might exceeds all such creaturely powers. In these passages in Isaiah, we see some of the strongest statements of divine sovereignty and power in the entire Old Testament. If the Lord truly intends to deliver his people from exile, Judah needs to be reassured that he is more than mighty enough for the task.

The prophet's words here, with their pointed rhetorical questions concerning the uniqueness of the Lord's might, might recall the Lord's speech to Job, declaring his supremacy over all of the forces of death, chaos and evil that assaulted him. Judah and Israel may just be small nations in their wider region, dominated by much greater nations and empires who serve foreign gods. Considering that the Lord was their God, Israel and Judah could easily fall into the trap of fancying that the gods of the Assyrians, Egyptians or Babylonians must be greater, as their nations were dominant over theirs.

Yet they needed to be reminded that the Lord was truly the God of the whole earth, the sovereign over all of creation. None of the nations are accounted as anything before him. His wisdom and counsel exceed all humans searching out.

His sovereignty extends over the untamed waters of the seas, and rules over the entirety of the heavens. The towering mountains are like small objects to be weighed out in scales for him. Considered in terms of their vaunted power and greatness, the nations that so terrified Judah are utterly inconsequential before him.

When one considers the true majesty of the Almighty God, the notion that he is comparable to any other, let alone the idea that one could craft a likeness to him, is utterly ridiculous. In particular, idolatry is exposed for the complete folly that it is. An idol is fashioned by human artisans, who need to be careful that their image doesn't rot or topple over.

Yet the true God rules eternal in the heavens, beyond any power to displace him. Verses 21-26 reinforce the point of verses 12-20, inviting the hearer to contemplate the heavens themselves as a testament to the incomparability of the Lord. As Psalm 19

verses 1-6 expresses things, and there was to the end of the world.

In them he has set a tent for the sun, which comes out like a bright room leaving his chamber, and like a strong man runs its course with joy. Its rising is from the end of the heavens, and its circuit to the end of them, and there is nothing hidden from its heat. The Lord sits enthroned in the highest heavens, above the vault of the firmament, here pictured as a vast hemisphere.

The entire realm of human habitation is under this. The Lord having spread out the heavens like a tent over the earth. Returning to the language of the frailty of flesh, and the comparison of it to grass and flowers, verse 24 speaks of nations, princes and rulers as akin to such fragile and transient things.

The Lord's question is renewed with added force. To whom then will you compare me, that I should be like him? The Lord is the master of the very stars in the heavens. What mere creature could be considered similar to such a one? The practical import of this great vision of God's glory, splendor and might is pressed home at the end of the chapter.

To a disheartened Israel that might consider itself beyond the Lord's sight or the reach of his arm, Isaiah's declaration of the Lord's incomparable strength, his loving commitment to his people, and his immeasurable wisdom is the very greatest reassurance they could be given. They have not passed beyond the Lord's loving concern and oversight, and none of their oppressors or obstacles before them could withstand his might. He is the true source of strength for those who lack it.

Even those who naturally seem to possess great strength will find that their strength fails them. Yet those who draw their strength from the Lord will find unfathomable resources of rejuvenation opened up to them. To a much weakened people, facing the prospect of the death of exile, this is the source of the most remarkable hope.

A question to consider. In the ministry of John the Baptist, he presents verse 3 of this chapter as an explanation for what he is doing. How does an understanding of this statement in its context help us better to understand what John the Baptist is doing with it in his pronouncement? After the chapter introducing this new section of the book of Isaiah, chapters 41 to 48 develop the theological themes that we saw in chapter 40, underlining the lordship of God over history, creation, and the nations, and his utterly surpassing greatness over all of the false gods and idols.

The theological message of these chapters, their message about God, is one of the most pronounced in the entirety of the Old Testament. But this is no mere abstract theology. It is truth about God, powerfully and urgently addressed to people caught up in the turmoil of the storms of history.

When the vessel of the nation would be stricken on the rocks of hostile imperial powers, its capsized sailors and passengers left flailing in the abyssal deep, their strength gradually being sapped away by the bitter cold of the waters, it would help them to know that their God is the master of the chaotic waters, and he has assured them that, whether in the ship or out of it, he will get his people to his promised shore. Likewise, when helplessly battered by opposing powers, knowing that they served a God who is greater than all of those powers could not be more essential. Within these chapters, there are recurring legal motifs at play.

There is, as it were, a great cosmic trial scene to which the lord summons the nations and their gods. The trial will establish who is the true God and who are false. The entire earth is called to attend the judgment, the coastlands or islands representing the farthest reaches of the nations, called to summon up all of their strength.

They are commanded to approach and present their case for assessment of the divine court. The lord presents evidence in support of his claim to be the one true master of history, the one who has demonstrated his rule within the arena of great human events on the center stage of the affairs of the nations. The identity of the figure stirred up from the east is likely Cyrus, although John Goldengain notes the possibility that the figure in view might be Abraham, an interpretation historically followed by John Calvin and several others and which would be strengthened by parallels with verses 8 and 9. Cyrus, likely presented in the more general terms here, will come into greater focus in later chapters.

The same language of stirring up will be used of Cyrus in chapter 45 verse 13. I have stirred him up in righteousness, and I will make all his ways level. He shall build my city and set my exiles free, not for price or reward.

Says the Lord of hosts. Ezra chapter 1 verse 1 also speaks of the Lord stirring up the spirit of Cyrus. As does 2nd Chronicles chapter 36 verse 22.

Gary Smith, disagreeing with readings that identify this character either as Cyrus or as Abraham, argues that it is Assyria that is in view here. The empire that turned many other nations into chaff to be driven away by the wind would face that same fate itself. As such prophecies are very general and figurative, we probably should not be too preoccupied with identifying specific historical reference.

Their words can speak powerfully into various contexts. However, the case for Cyrus as the primary referent does seem to be the strongest to me, especially when we consider how strongly and commonly the notion of the Lord stirring up is associated with him. The expression used of this figure in verse 2 is variously understood.

John Oswald argues that it should be rendered presenting the figure not merely as a victorious conqueror, but as one who is an agent and servant of effective righteousness, setting things to rights as he subdues the nations and reduces oppressors to dust. Many



other commentators and translators interpret the expression differently though, as relating to the victory that meets the one stirred up from the east at every step. This figure is successful in pursuing his foes.

In verse 4 the Lord interrogates the assembled participants in the trial. Who was the one who initiated all of this? In what we might see as an allusion back to the revelation of the Divine Name at the burning bush in Exodus, the Lord declares that he is the one who did so. He is the I Am.

He is the first and the last, a theological expansion of some of the meaning inherent in the Divine Name. In the last, the Lord brings to effect what he has determined from the first. His purposes stand certain and sure, beyond the power of men to undermine.

Seeing the purpose of the Lord taking effect in history, in this figure from the east, the nations are dismayed and terrified. Verses 5-7 look back to verse 1, where the Lord summoned the coastlands to attend, renew their strength, and draw near for judgment. In verse 5 we see that the coastlands have indeed drawn near and come.

Seeing what the Lord is accomplishing in the earth, they are deeply afraid. However, they look to their neighbours and idols for strength, rather than to the Lord. Yet far from receiving strength from their idols, the idolaters must strengthen the idols, seeking to secure their idols from toppling.

The futility of the idolaters is contrasted with the situation of Israel, the chosen people of the Lord, called in their forefather Abraham from the farthest corners of the world. Smith notes a progression in the description of Israel here, from my servant, to the people whom I have chosen, to the offspring of Abraham, to my friend or beloved. As the servant, they are commissioned to act in the name of the Lord, their master.

They were graciously chosen by the Lord to be his people, set apart in their forefathers Jacob and Abraham, as a people of the Lord's own and beloved of the Lord. Israel's standing as beloved of the Lord is a continuation of the Lord's relationship with their forefather Abraham. They are beloved as his seed.

While I don't believe that we should see the one stirred up in the East in verse 2 as Abraham, I do think that the parallels are important to recognise. Cyrus' actions in delivering the people of God from the land of the Chaldeans will be akin to a renewal of the first call of Abraham. The Lord assures his people of his continued love for them, his personal presence with them, his empowering and upholding of them, and his dismaying and confounding of all of their foes.

Punctuating his statements with the charge, Fear not, the hero might recall the pivotal moments in which this expression is used in the Old Testament narrative. For instance, when the Lord cuts a covenant with Abraham in Genesis chapter 15, a covenant

confirmed using the same expression with Isaac in chapter 26, or when Moses exhorted the terrified children of Israel at the Red Sea. The Lord's power, his presence with them, his promises to and good purposes for them, are what they need to stand against the nations that would terrify them.

All of those adversaries would be put to shame. Smith observes that the description here seems out of keeping with the ways that the Babylonians and Medo-Persians are described relative to Israel during the exilic period, where they are not fighting against Israel. He suggests that we see this as referring to the Assyrians in 701 BC or the Babylonians in 587 BC.

Perhaps this would be better read as a more general statement, including such events, but also others besides them. While Israel might regard itself as little more than a puny worm before the dragons of the nations, it is the Lord himself who is on their side. Imagery of harvesting and threshing has been used on several occasions earlier in this book.

Here Judah will become the Lord's threshing sledge, a heavy wooden frame with stones and teeth of metal beneath it, used to separate the grain from the stalks. All obstacles before them would be broken beneath them as the Lord used them as his instrument. Their foes would be driven away by the wind, and the Lord, described as the Holy One of Israel, a title that pervades the entire book of Isaiah, but is rarely found outside of it, would be glorified through it all.

The promise of verses 17-20 is of the transformation of the barren and dry wilderness into fruitful, verdant and well-watered land. We've already encountered similar promises in chapter 35 verses 1-2. And also in verses 6 and 7 of that chapter.

Even though there is no reference here to the Lord bringing people through the wilderness, many commentators see allusions to a second or new Exodus in these verses, perhaps especially in the reference to the opening up of rivers and fountains, much as the Lord provided water for the children of Israel in the desert of Sinai. As Peter Lighthouse notes, there are four locations mentioned here, the high places, the valleys, the wilderness and the dry land, and each has a corresponding form of water provided for it, rivers on the heights, springs in the valleys, pools in the wilderness, fountains in the dry land. The trees that the Lord will plant in the wilderness are trees that afford shade more than food.

They enable travellers to find relief from the heat of the burning sun. The power of the Lord to render the parched, burning and deserted places green, well-watered and shaded would be a demonstration of his power to those that contemplated it. In verse 21 we return to the scene with which the chapter began, with the nations assembled as participants in the trial of the gods.

The adulterers were condemned earlier in the chapter, but now the false gods whom they worship are the ones being challenged. What account can they provide for themselves? The Lord, as we have seen, declares the future in advance, as the one whose purposes from the very beginning will be realised by his providential power and authority. Yet the false gods have neither true foresight of the future, nor, more importantly, are their purposes effective in history.

If they could really tell what was going to happen afterwards, as those who had power over the course of history, then they would really be terrified, they would really be gods. But yet they cannot, they are not true gods. In contrast, the Lord's word did stand.

Seeing Cyrus come down from the north upon Babylon to take it over, they should see the Lord's word coming into effect. Cyrus, indeed, would invoke the name of the Lord, as we see in Ezra chapter 1 verses 2-4. Cyrus would trample down many great rulers, and through him the Lord would demonstrate his sovereignty.

The Lord declared his good news of deliverance of Jerusalem long before it took effect. Can any of the idols of the nations do the same? No, they cannot. They are empty, they are worthless, they are utterly powerless to deliver those that worship them.

The Lord alone is the true God and master of history. Before his work, all the idols and false gods of the nations are struck down. A question to consider.

What are some of the ways in the description of the decree of Cyrus and its aftermath that the scripture underlines the fact that the Lord was behind it all? There are four passages in the book of Isaiah commonly known as the servant songs after the work of Bernhard Duhm. The first of these so-called songs is found at the beginning of chapter 42. While some commentators add 61 verses 1-3 as a fifth, the generally recognised servant songs are found here in chapter 49 verses 1-6, in chapter 50 verses 4-9 and in chapter 52 verse 13 to chapter 53 verse 12.

The identification of these passages as servant songs has not been uncriticised. Duhm's original theory treated them as secondary and independent bodies of oracles that were later added to the text that surrounds them. Commentators were thereby encouraged to abstract these from their contexts.

Importantly, many who have accepted Duhm's identification of these passages as servant songs have resisted his disconnection of them from their contexts, rather regarding them as a series of texts bound together in a meaningful narrative sequence and firmly embedded in their immediate settings. The conviction that the recognition of this common form of text need not entail the fragmentation of the text more generally does not by itself settle questions of what is called redaction history, the historical processes of compilation and editing by which the text was moulded into its final form. Many who would emphasise the unity of the final text would nonetheless regard the

servant songs as later additions, which were carefully and sensitively woven into the fabric of their surroundings to form a unified literary work.

However, I see no reason why such an explanation for these texts' presence is required. The question of the identity of the servant figure in these passages has received extensive attention. This question has clearly been around for a long time, as the Book of Acts describes the Ethiopian eunuch asking Philip concerning Isaiah chapter 53, "'About whom,' I ask you, does this prophet say this? About himself or about someone else?' The Ethiopian eunuch's initial supposition about the likely figure and view, that it might be the prophet himself, is one that still has plenty of currency in academia today.

John Goldengay and Norman Wybray argue that, rather than thinking in terms of some unknown servant figure speaking, we should generally interpret these as the prophet's self-characterisation, the prophet in their understanding being whoever wrote so-called Deutero-Isaiah. The prophet Jeremiah, for instance, characterises himself in ways that sound similar to the figure of Isaiah chapter 53, in Jeremiah chapter 11 verse 19, "'But I was like a gentle lamb led to the slaughter. I did not know it was against me they devised schemes, saying, Let us destroy the tree with its fruit, let us cut him off from the land of the living, that his name be remembered no more.'" Christians have unsurprisingly followed the New Testament use of these passages concerning Christ.

For instance, the words of Isaiah chapter 53 are applied to Jesus in places like 1 Peter chapter 2 verses 21-25. "'For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps. He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth.

When he was reviled, he did not revile in return. When he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness.

By his wounds you have been healed, for you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the shepherd and overseer of your souls.'" When reading Isaiah, however, it is important that we read it on its own terms. There are several Old Testament passages that are applied to Jesus in the New Testament, which nonetheless clearly don't have Jesus or the Messiah as their immediate referent in their initial context. The New Testament writers read scripture typologically, recognizing the ways in which a passage could truly refer to Christ typologically, even when Christ was not its direct referent.

For instance, the young woman who would conceive and bear a son, whose name would be Emmanuel, back in chapter 7 verse 14, almost certainly does not directly refer to Mary and Jesus. But the Gospel of Matthew is accurately reading that text, when Matthew sees that text as indirectly referring to them and fulfilled by them. Throughout the book of Isaiah we have seen examples of telescopic prophecy, where different horizons of fulfillment are present for a single prophetic word.

There is no reason in principle, then, why we should reject readings that relate the servant to some figure other than Jesus, provided we recognize with the New Testament authors that Jesus is, in some sense, the true fulfillment of the figure of the servant. The identification of the servant with Israel finds some support in the wider context. In chapter 41 verses 8 and 9, for instance, we read, But you, Israel, my servant, Jacob, whom I have chosen, the offspring of Abraham, my friend, you whom I took from the ends of the earth, and called from its farthest corners, saying to you, You are my servant, I have chosen you, and not cast you off.

At the end of this chapter the blind and deaf servant is Israel. Likewise, the descriptions of Israel at various points closely match descriptions of the figure of the servant. They are both chosen and have the Spirit given to them.

The servant, some have argued, should be seen as a personification of Israel, which is often spoken of as if it were a single person, as Jacob, for instance. Yet, considering the fact the servant ministers to Israel, for example, in bringing back the remnant of Israel in chapter 49 verse 6, a simple identification of the servant with Israel seems to have its problems. There are various individuals with whom the servant might be identified.

Probably the most obvious contender is a Davidic or Messianic figure, given the royal characteristics of the servant and the fact that David is referred to as the Lord's servant on many occasions in Scripture, not least in chapter 37 verse 35. In connection with Messianic themes, commentators frequently observe the concept of corporate representation, where a single figure could stand for the entire people, the destiny of the whole devolving onto one representative or representative group. Some have also seen mosaic parallels, which given 2nd Exodus themes in Isaiah would not be entirely surprising.

Given the way that the figure of Cyrus is spoken of in this section of Isaiah, here is a further possibility that some have suggested. We could also follow those who question why we need to look for a single servant, rather than recognise different figures being addressed under this title, perhaps with a progression from a failed to a faithful servant. The true picture of the servant, however, is one that will most clearly emerge as we work through the actual text of Isaiah, and it requires that we read the servant material in its proper context.

At the end of the preceding chapter, the Lord displayed the emptiness and impotence of the idols. Now, in contrast to the vain idols of the nations, the Lord presents his servant. The choosing, commissioning and equipping of the servant is suggestive of a royal figure.

In considering the concept of the servant, we might easily think of the servanthood in view, in terms of menial labour and low social standing. But here, as often is the case elsewhere, the concept is an elevating one. The servant is the one who acts in the name

of the Lord, appointed by him to act with effective authority in the world, to bring about his purposes.

When the Lord calls David his servant, for instance, it carries this sort of sense. The servant here is the one by whom the Lord will bring justice to the nations, not merely to Israel, setting things to rights. In so doing, he will be upheld and empowered by the Lord's own spirit.

In the Old Testament, we see the spirit of the Lord coming upon anointed deliverers and kings at several points in the history of the nation. The task of the servant, as described here, could be seen as the fulfilment of the calling of Israel, as Abraham was chosen in order that the nations might be blessed through him. The behaviour of the servant, however, would not be that expected of a mighty king.

His establishment of justice would be distinguished by gentleness and compassion towards the weak and the faltering, towards those who would easily be broken, crushed or quenched by a typical ruler in their might and zeal. He would be patient and persevering in his pursuit of justice and would not grow weary or give up before he succeeded in this task. In such behaviour, he would truly reflect the character of the Lord himself.

The Lord speaks concerning and to the servant in the verses that follow. Once again, the Lord reminds us that he is the creator and sustainer of all, the one who gives all life and breath. The Lord underlines the fact that he is the one who called the servant.

The servant is acting in his name, power and authority. The Lord called the servant in his righteousness, as an expression of his commitment to his promises and covenant, and he is going to uphold his servant in the entirety of his mission. The servant is given as a covenant for the people, likely Israel, and as a light for the nations.

In describing the servant as a covenant for the people, we might perhaps see him as the one who represents the fulfilment of the Lord's covenant promises, such that his sending can be identified with the gift of the covenant itself. All of the promises of God find their yes in him. To the nations, he would bring deliverance from the darkness of ignorance and the imprisonment of oppression, injustice and idolatry.

Throughout this section of Isaiah, the contrast between the Lord and the idols and the false gods of the nations is prominent. This contrast once again comes to the foreground in verses 8 and 9, recalling statements like those of chapter 41, verses 21 to 23. The work of the servant would serve as a demonstration of the Lord's sovereignty in history and his sole claim to worship.

The glory belongs to the Lord alone, and any worship of idols denies him his proper due. We should remember that this is all still part of the Lord's debate with the nations and

their false gods, which began at the beginning of the preceding chapter. At several points in the Psalms, for instance, Psalms 96, 98 and 149, the psalmist speaks of singing a new song to the Lord, an expression that we also find on a couple of occasions in the book of Revelation.

The new song seems to be a fitting response to a remarkable new manifestation of the Lord's majesty and righteousness, here displayed in the commissioning of the servant and his actions within history at this time. Verses 10 to 12 describe the assembled voices of the peoples, united in praise of the Lord in their many and various locations, locations from the furthest extremities of the earth to the nearby desert regions. The Lord himself is going forth like a champion for battle, roaring as he charges his foes.

For so long it seemed as though the Lord was silent, even absent, but now with the Lord's mighty shout, all of that will change. The Lord compares himself to a woman at the point of labour, about to deliver her child into the world. As she gasps and screams in her pangs before bringing forth something remarkable anew, so will be the Lord's action in the world at this time.

Imagery of birth pangs elsewhere are used of arrival at the point of crisis. Verdant places will be made barren and well-watered places parched. When the Lord crushes his foes as a mighty warrior, he will deliver and guide his helpless people, providing for them all of the way, keeping his covenant commitment to them.

Once again we might hear reminders of the exodus here. No idol, the Lord declares, could perform such wonders. All who trust in such idols would be put to shame.

Having just spoken about the servants delivering and leading the blind, verse 19 might surprise us as it speaks of the Lord's servant as himself blind and deaf, describing the servant in a manner that should remind us of chapter 6 verses 9-10. And he said, The blind and deaf servant is clearly Israel, insensitive to the word of the Lord and manifestly incapable of performing the mission of the one in whose name he is supposed to act. The Lord had chosen Israel out of all of the nations and commissioned him to bear his word, committing the oracles of his truth to them, revealing his glorious law to them at Sinai.

The purpose of the Lord was for the revelation of his righteousness, but the people are languishing, spiritually insensible and oppressed by their foes, with none to deliver them. No one even seems to be reflecting upon their sorry history in order to draw its proper lessons. The prophet himself addresses Israel concerning some of the lessons that should be learnt from its painful experience.

Its condition is on account of their rejection of the Lord and his ways. The Lord is the one who brought disaster upon them. Israel, the Lord's failed servant, has not considered its sins and the Lord's judgments.

They have not taken the appropriate lessons to heart and amended their ways. It would presumably only be as the Lord raised up his faithful messianic servant that the failed servant of Israel would be restored and in the messianic servant enabled to perform its divinely intended mission. A question to consider.

Matthew speaks of verses 1-4 of this chapter being fulfilled in chapter 12 verses 17-21 of his gospel. How might the prophecy of the servant here be related to Jesus? Isaiah chapter 42 spoke of the calling and equipping of the servant to establish his justice, a proof of the Lord's sovereignty over the idolaters and their false gods. The chapter concluded, however, with the description of the sorry state of Israel, supposed to be the Lord's servant, yet blind in death and suffering under the Lord's hand of judgment.

Chapter 43 opens with God's word of hope spoken into this dark situation. The Lord is the one who first formed and created Israel, and when they have been brought low, he is the one who will raise them up again. Once again, with words found more commonly in Isaiah than anywhere else in scripture, and which are especially found in this section of the book, the Lord tells his people, fear not.

The one who first called and established them, the one who calls them by name, will also redeem them. Israel would pass through terrible trials, yet the Lord would be with them every step of that way. They would be tried through invasion, oppression, exile, and many other such things, but they would not ultimately be destroyed or harmed.

The Lord would preserve and be with them through it all. Perhaps the greatest assurances of the Lord's commitment to his people are found in the way that he binds himself to them, in such a manner that his identity is at stake in their deliverance. In verse 3, the Lord declares his name to his people, with titles that manifest the way that he has taken them upon himself.

The Lord, your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Saviour. The identification of the Lord as the Holy One of Israel, of course, is repeated throughout the book of Isaiah, being a key unifying thread of the entire work. The Lord is the Father of his son Israel.

They bear his name, and he bears their name. As he will say in chapter 49, verses 14-16. Whether or not the references to Egypt, Cush, and Seba should be taken as very concrete historical references, the Lord's great love for his people is seen in history in his judgments upon great nations for the sake of their redemption.

For instance, in the Exodus, the great plagues wrought upon the land of Egypt were done by the Lord in remembrance of his covenant. In particular, he speaks of these nations as Israel's ransom. The judgment of the Lord fell especially heavily upon Egypt, for instance, in order that his people might be released.

Perhaps we should see the Passover behind this, where Israel was marked out and



redeemed as the Lord's firstborn son, in part through bringing death upon the firstborn of Egypt. Considering the lengths to which the Lord would go in his love for his people, we should not be surprised at his promise to bring their exiles back from the corners of the earth, restoring the people that he first created. The Lord's returning of the exiles of Israel is a recurring theme in the book of Isaiah.

Back in chapter 41, the passage opened with a trial being set up, and the nations summoned to it. These trial themes continue in this chapter, as the Lord directly challenges the idols and their worshippers once more. In chapter 42, verses 19 and 20, Israel was characterized in the following words, Who is blind but my servant, or deaf as my messenger whom I send? Who is blind as my dedicated one, or blind as the servant of the Lord? He sees many things, but does not observe them.

His ears are open, but he does not hear. Now the Lord says that these people should be brought forth, before all of the nations, who are also assembled, they are to give their testimony to the Lord's deity, demonstrated in the fact that he foretells and rules in the affairs of men throughout history. Even if Israel had not responded to the Lord's work as they ought to have done, they had most definitely seen it, and could testify to it.

They are described as his witnesses, but also as his servant. If these terms are paralleled, the implication is that their work occurs through their experiencing of his deliverances in history, and their bearing witness concerning them to the nations. The Lord is the only God.

The claims of all pretenders to God's throne are shown to be hollow. No other people can stand forward and testify of the work of their idols in their history in the same manner as Israel can do concerning the Lord's actions and theirs. The Lord is both unique and supreme.

No one can rival him. The Lord had earlier spoken of Egypt, Kush and Seba being given for Israel's ransom. Now he speaks of the Babylonians and the Chaldeans in a similar manner.

The Babylonians, who would be the greatest power the world had yet known, would be overthrown and made fugitives, all on account of the Lord's steadfast commitment and concern to deliver his people. As John Oswald aptly puts it, the deliverance of Israel is not on account of who they are, but whose they are. The Lord revealed his name and identity in the context of the exodus from Egypt, and now he is going to accomplish a new exodus.

The language of verses 16-21 clearly refers back to this earlier exodus, presenting it as the paradigm within which the new exodus will occur. The Lord had divided the waters of the Red Sea so that his people could pass through on dry land. Now he talks about making another way in the sea, or path in the mighty waters.

The Lord had drawn out the army of the Egyptians to pursue his people and to be destroyed in the deep. Now he will again bring forth chariot and horse, summoning them to their destruction. Yet even in this recollection of the events of their deliverance from Egypt, the Lord says, Remember not the former things, nor consider the things of old.

What he is about to do is going to eclipse what he has done in the past. We have similar statements in places like Jeremiah 16, verses 14 and 15. For I will bring them back to their own land that I gave to their fathers.

Creating a new path through the waters, defeating their enemies, and then providing a way through the wilderness. He will bring the people back. Though figurative language, not to be fulfilled in some literalistic sense, all of this speaks to the remarkable character of the restoration of the Lord's people after the exile.

We should also hear here anticipations of a greater redemption that the Lord's people would experience in history. Deliverance from death itself and the bringing in of the new creation. None of this occurred in response to the sacrifices of Israel.

In the very first chapter of the prophecy, Isaiah challenges the religious practice of the people, where they trust in ritual and are actually displeasing the Lord by their rituals that are performed with blood on their hands. The Lord there describes them as like an occupying army trampling his courts. Even though Israel might think that they've been currying favor with the Lord by bringing forth their burnt offerings and sacrifices, in actual fact what they have been doing is bringing their sins and transgressions before him, burdening him with their sins, wearing him with their iniquities.

When the Lord redeems them, it will not be on account of anything that they have done towards the Lord, anything that they have merited from his hand. Rather, it will be purely for the Lord's own sake, out of his own love for his people. If they have any doubt about this, they should bring forth the evidence.

Israel has been sinning from the time of their first forefathers, and the people who have mediated between them and the Lord, the priests and the prophets and others, have all transgressed against the Lord. Even Moses, the great mediator of the Exodus, was not allowed to enter into the Promised Land because of his sin. If they want to know why judgment is falling upon the priests and the temple and why the nation is being delivered up to destruction, this is why.

A question to consider, what do passages like this teach us about the way that the sacrificial system worked? In Isaiah chapter 41, the Lord began a trial and debate with the idolatrous nations and their false gods. In chapter 44, this trial of the gods continues to provide the backdrop for the prophecy. The Lord is demonstrating that he alone, of all of the gods, is the true one.

He is the creator of all, the master of history, and over all of the nations. Just as in the preceding chapter, this chapter opens with a, but now. In both instances, the sorry state into which the nation has fallen through its sins is contrasted with the loving commitment of the Lord to them and his coming redeeming action for them.

Chapter 43 ended with the terrible sentence that fell upon Israel on account of its sins. Chapter 44 opens by addressing Jacob my servant, Israel whom I have chosen, accentuating the contrast that is being drawn by the repetition of the double name from the prior verse. Verse 2 recalls the great song of Moses from Deuteronomy chapter 32 and his blessing of the tribes in the passage that follows in chapter 33, the only other places in which the term Jashoran is found.

Jashoran is an unusual term for Israel, and perhaps the intention is to evoke the larger context of those passages in Deuteronomy, passages which certainly invite intertextual comparisons with this passage in Isaiah. For instance, in Deuteronomy chapter 32 verses 15 to 18, As in Isaiah chapter 44, this passage in Deuteronomy speaks of the birth of the nation, and in verse 8 of our passage in Isaiah, the Lord will speak of himself as the true rock over against the false gods of the nations, an important theme in Deuteronomy chapter 13. The song of Moses foretells the way that the Lord will prove his supremacy over the false gods of the nations, and how he will redeem his people.

This great prophetic statement of divine intent given through Moses is being fulfilled in the events declared here in Isaiah, so perhaps we should recognize some allusions here. The motif of the pouring out of the spirit, most particularly seen in connection with Pentecost, occurs in several places in the Old Testament prophets, perhaps most notably in the book of Joel. Imagery of the Lord's watering of the land has already been used by the prophet Isaiah at many points in his book.

Here the watering is explicitly connected with the Lord's gift of his life-giving spirit. When the nation was so blessed with the vivifying presence of the Lord's spirit, people, whether Israelites or Gentile proselytes, would be eager to identify themselves with the nation that so displayed the glory of its maker. In the debate with the nations and their false gods, the Lord had presented Israel as his witnesses, even in their sinful rebellion.

In its history, Israel had witnessed the faithfulness, the might, and the holiness of the Lord, and could bear witness to it and to him. The Lord is unique and supreme, and there are no gods that can threaten him, nor any other like him. Besides substantiating the Lord's case against the idols and their worshippers, the demonstration of the Lord's uniqueness and sovereignty is a source of assurance to his people, who are once again told not to fear.

The Lord is the first, and he is the last. The Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. He, as the creator of all things, is before all other powers, and as the judge of all, he will stand unrivaled when they have all returned to the dust.

He has formed his people Israel as his witnesses, who can testify to the fact that the Lord has spoken concerning his future actions, which he has brought to pass. Can any other god produce such witnesses? In this is demonstrated the fact that no other god exists, no other rock, using the terminology of the Song of Moses, looking for other peoples to bear witness to the faithfulness and goodness and greatness of their gods, in comparison to the witness that Israel can bear concerning the Lord. None are to be found.

In one of the most powerful polemics against idolatry in the whole of the scripture, the Lord skewers the futility and stupidity of idol-making. Idolaters clearly had sophisticated accounts of what idols meant, and how, when they were worshipping them, they were really worshipping the god behind them. All of this, however, is mystification of what is actually taking place.

To demystify the process, the Lord goes back to the construction of the idols in the first place. Robert Paul Wolfe tells the old Jewish joke of Mrs. Feinschmeck and her son Reuben with his irrational fear of blintzes. For some reason her son had a deep fear of this delicacy, and so she was advised by a child psychologist to go through the process of making the blintzes in front of him, so that he could see what they were made of.

Wolfe writes, It's alright, Mama. She folded over the first corner. I'm alright, Mama.

She folded the second corner. I'm alright, Mama. She folded the third corner.

I'm still alright, Mama. Finally she folded over the last corner. And there it is, Reuben.

Help! Blintzes! In Isaiah chapter 44, the Lord is making the blintzes for Israel, helping his son to get over an irrational view of idols. Whatever sophisticated mystification pagan theologians might give for the idols, when it all comes down to it, they are constructed by human beings out of inanimate pieces of wood and stone and metal. There's no great virtue conferred by those that make them.

There's no power inherent in the materials that are used, and the process of their construction is mundane. By breaking down the process of forming an idol, step by step, the Lord shows his people just how irrational idol worship is. People are prostrating themselves before pieces of wood taken from trees, parts of which were used as fuel for fire, fashioned by human craftsmen who are but flesh.

He becomes hungry and his strength fails. He drinks no water and is faint. The image that they bear upon them is nothing but the image of a man.

What renders such an object fitting to receive the worship belonging to God? If they truly knew what they were doing, they would realize the abomination that the idol is. An idol is such an abomination because of what it claims for itself. It claims the worship of the Lord whence is but a piece of wood.

The more hollow and vain the mockery of the true, the more grievous the offence. In contrast to the idols formed by men, the Lord formed Israel. Israel has been established by the Lord as a witness to his deity.

And as John Oswalt observes, they can take comfort in the fact that their task has not yet been finished. The Lord has not forgotten them and has not finished with them. Indeed, he had dealt with the great obstacle, their sins and their transgressions which had been removed from his sight.

They are called to respond accordingly, returning to him as he has restored them. Heavens and earth are called to join together in song to praise the Lord for what he has done. The Lord's glory would be seen in his redemption of Israel.

Jacob himself would be a demonstration of the Lord's deity. The Lord, Israel's Redeemer, who first formed them from the womb, perhaps in the redemption from Egypt, is also the creator of all things. As the creator of all things, he is sovereign over all things.

He is the one who rules at the first as the one who created, and he is the one who will rule at the last as the judge. And his purposes will be effective over all others in between. He brings to nothing the words of counsellors, wise men and diviners of the nations.

But the words of his prophetic witnesses, the words of Israel his servant, will be fulfilled, more particularly in the restoration of Jerusalem and Judah. In the drying up of the deep, we probably have an allusion back to the crossing of the Red Sea as the Lord led his people out of Egypt. In redeeming his people from Babylon, the Lord will be accomplishing a new exodus.

The final verse of this chapter is the most startling and is one of several reasons why many commentators argue that the Book of Isaiah should be split into different parts, chapters after chapter 40 being attributed to some prophet from the middle of the 6th century at the very earliest. The last prophecies that we can clearly date within the Book of Isaiah come from 701 BC at the time of the attack of the Assyrians upon Jerusalem. Yet the man who is being spoken of here did not perform the prophesied actions until 539 BC, over 160 years later.

The nearest analogy that we have to such a prophecy of a person's name many years before their birth is in 1 Kings 13 verse 2. And the man cried against the altar by the word of the Lord and said, O altar, altar! Thus says the Lord, Behold, a son shall be born to the house of David, Josiah by name, and he shall sacrifice on you the priests of the high places who make offerings on you, and human bones shall be burned on you. Part of the strangeness of verse 28 here is that the name Cyrus is not presented as a prediction. It is just used as if the readers already knew what the name Koresh or Cyrus meant.

It is important to recognize that many of the people who do not believe that this was written by the prophet Isaiah do not on that account automatically deny that this is a predictive prophecy. Many see this as something that is given in the years running up to 539 BC, speaking of a known figure but declaring something remarkable that he is about to perform. Some commentators have suggested that the name might have been added in later in recognition of the fulfillment of Isaiah the son of Amos' prophecy 160 years earlier.

Verses 3 and 4 of the following chapter might give a bit more weight to those who see the name Koresh as part of an original prophecy from Isaiah the son of Amos. Those verses read, I will give you the treasures of darkness and the hordes in secret places, that you may know that it is I, the Lord, the God of Israel, who call you by your name. For the sake of my servant Jacob and Israel my chosen, I call you by your name.

I name you, though you do not know me. Cyrus has already been predicted within this part of Isaiah, most notably in chapter 41 verse 25. Remarkably Cyrus is here spoken of as the Lord's appointed shepherd for his people.

The shepherd is the king-like figure and this shepherd Cyrus is going to be the one through whom the Lord will achieve his purpose. That purpose being the restoration of Jerusalem and Judah. In 539 BC Cyrus took Babylon and shortly after he made a decree by which many of the Jewish exiles started to return to Jerusalem.

We read of all of this in Ezra chapter 1 verses 1 to 4. Thus says Cyrus, king of Persia, the Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Whoever is among you of all his people, may his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem, which is in Judah, and rebuild the house of the Lord, the God of Israel. He is the God who is in Jerusalem.

And let each survivor, in whatever place he sojourns, be assisted by the men of his place with silver and gold, with goods and with beasts, besides freewill offerings for the house of God that is in Jerusalem. When we consider the place of this prophecy concerning Cyrus here, it is also important that we keep in mind the larger context. The Lord is disputing with the idols and gods of the nations, showing that they cannot foretell the future.

This prophecy is part of the Lord's proof that he is sovereign in history, and perhaps the remarkable character of a prophecy delivered 160 years beforehand was to serve more fully to underline that fact. Wherever we fall on the particular question of when this is to be dated, it is important that we do not thereby evacuate the argument that surrounds it of its proper force. A question to consider.

In the remarkable satirical section of this chapter, where the Lord demystifies the idols and reveals them for what they are, the Lord helps to free his people's imagination from

something that might have kept them captive. The images of the nations are no gods at all. What comparable processes of demystification might be applied to certain of the idols of our own time, such as money for example? These chapters of Isaiah are an extended challenge to the gods of the idolatrous nations, a trial in which the claims of the gods to be gods are being tested.

The Lord declares himself to be unique and supreme, the sole creator, the Lord of history, and the redeemer of his people. His people are witnesses of his mastery of history, as they can testify to the way in which he has declared future events long before, and that his word and purpose have stood firm. None of the so-called gods of the nations can do this.

As part of the argument of the preceding chapter, the Lord demystified the idols, unveiling them to be mere creations of frail mortals, made of just wood, stone and metal, utterly unworthy of the worship that they were being given. Indeed, to worship such idols of man's fashioning as if they were gods is a gross abomination, rendering to such objects what only truly belongs to God himself, and implying that the eternal, immortal and glorious creator and Lord of all could be fittingly represented by mean mockeries of men's hands. Chapter 44 ended with a statement of the Lord's manifest sovereignty in history through the work of Qoresh, Cyrus, whom the Lord appointed to deliver his people from exile and return them to Jerusalem, which Cyrus would order to be rebuilt along with its temple.

As we discussed in chapter 44, the reference to Cyrus in this context is one of the reasons why many commentators dispute the claim that chapters 40-66 should be dated to the time of Isaiah the son of Amoz. While for some this has been on account of their refusal to believe in predictive prophecy, others doubt that such a prophecy, mentioning the name of Cyrus in such a manner, makes good sense well over a century before his birth, and 160 years before the prophecy was fulfilled. No one would know who this Cyrus was.

Typically, prophecies of figures and events so far in the future are delivered in less specific language. Some respond to this problem by arguing that the name of Cyrus might have been added to the prophecy of Isaiah later, when it became clear that he was the man in which the prophecy would be fulfilled, while others suggest that such prophecies were given through someone other than Isaiah, likely sometime in the 540s BC, in the years leading up to Cyrus' invasion of Babylon. Perhaps the most surprising features of Cyrus as described at the end of chapter 44 and beginning of chapter 45 are the terms applied to him.

Chapter 44 verse 28 speaks of him as the Lord's appointed shepherd, language typically associated with the king who would fulfil his purpose. Here in chapter 45, Cyrus is arrestingly spoken of in language that we would associate with the awaited Davidic king,

as the Lord's anointed, literally as the Messiah. The Lord has expressly appointed Cyrus for the purpose of releasing his people and re-establishing Jerusalem and its temple.

The Lord is going to use Cyrus in a remarkable way, grasping his right hand to empower him and subduing nations before him. Loosening the loins of kings might perhaps refer to the disarming involved in removing the belts bearing the king's weapons from around their waists. Another possibility is that it refers to the kings soiling themselves in fear.

Strong cities would not be able to withstand Cyrus, their gates would be opened before him or broken through. The Lord would use Cyrus for the sake of his people, even though Cyrus did not know the Lord. While Cyrus does refer to the Lord in his decree for the return to Jerusalem and the rebuilding of the temple, there is no evidence that he was a believer in the Lord.

Presumably he regarded the Lord as one of the many gods of the nations. However, whatever Cyrus' understanding, the Lord is using him to accomplish his purpose, to demonstrate his concern for his people and his supremacy over all of the false gods of the nations. Cyrus is named and set apart for a divine purpose, much as Israel is, but Cyrus is not aware of how the Lord is using him.

The king's heart is in the hands of the Lord and the Lord moves it in whatever way he wants. This all serves to display the glory and uniqueness of the Lord to the watching world. Verse 7 declares the Lord's power both in the world of nature and in the events of history.

The Lord is behind and over all of these things, whether the light and darkness of the first day of creation or the corresponding well-being and calamity of the events of human history. The Lord summons the rain of righteousness from the heaven and the answering fruitfulness of the earth, all revealing his sovereign and gracious work. The sovereignty of the Lord in fashioning his people and enacting his purposes is illustrated on several occasions in scripture by the image of the potter, the pot and the clay of which he forms it.

As in Romans chapter 9 or Jeremiah chapter 18, the Lord's message concerns the futility and the presumption of the people fashioned by his hand, objecting to the one that's fashioning them. In addition to being the maker of heaven and earth, the Lord is also the maker of his people, with his own purpose for them. The Lord has both the prerogative and the power to order all things.

He will declare what is to come to pass and what shall become of the people that he has fashioned, and no one is in any position to command him otherwise. The stirring up of Cyrus is the great potter fashioning clay for his purposes, using the unpromising material of the pagan king as the deliverer of his people. This purpose will be achieved in the most surprising of ways, without the payment of either ransom or tribute.



Cyrus would act in this way simply because the Lord stirred him up to do so. Such language of the Lord stirring up Cyrus is found elsewhere, in chapter 41 verse 2 for instance. Who stirred up one from the east, whom victory meets at every step? He gives up nations before him, so that he tramples kings underfoot.

He makes them like dust with his sword, like driven stubble with his bow. It is also used of Cyrus in Ezra and elsewhere. The work that the Lord would accomplish through Cyrus was a demonstration of his own righteousness, his faithfulness to his covenant, his inaction of his justice, and his setting of the world to rights.

The Lord is going to demonstrate his supremacy over all of the idols and false gods. When he does so, the nations will see and be put to shame in their idolatry. However, it will also be a moment of redemption, as people of all the nations humbled themselves before and sought to come under the rule of Israel, recognising that the Lord was in Israel's midst.

This is clearly not something that occurred in any full sense in the years following the return from Babylon. Rather, we can probably see here something of the greater awaited horizon of salvation, one foretold at several points in the book of Isaiah, which often has what some call telescopic prophecies, which can collapse future events at several different distances of time into a single projected future. The uniqueness of the Lord would be a publicly manifest fact, not a secret, but the incontrovertible reality evidenced by history.

Former idolaters would recognise the transcendence of the Lord, that he is a God who hides himself, but also his nearness to those who fear him. He is the God of Israel, the Saviour. In the revelation of the Lord's truth and glory, the idols of the nations would also be exposed in their emptiness.

The continuing trial motif is particularly prominent at the end of the chapter. The survivors of the judged nations are summoned to come together in an assembly. Even as refugees from their former lands, they are still going around carrying their wooden idols.

It should already be amply manifest that they cannot save them. The Lord challenges the idolaters. Who declared long in advance the events that have come to pass in their recent history? There is no God like the Lord, the unrivaled master of history.

But he is not merely the master of the destinies of the nations. He presents himself as their saviour too. If they will but turn to him, whether they be at the very ends of the earth, he will save them too.

The demonstration of the uniqueness of the Lord will come as every human being recognises that he is the Lord. Whether they bow unwillingly as defeated foes or as loving subjects, all will bow. Every tongue will swear allegiance to him.

The Lord is the one true source of justice and of might, the one who will establish his righteous rule in the earth. He will vindicate his servants and put to shame all of his foes. Righteousness and strength are the key qualities that mark someone out for rule.

And the Lord himself is the source of these things, the source of all true sovereignty and rule. It is to him that Israel and the converted of the nations shall look, finding in him, corresponding with his righteousness and strength, justification and true glory. A question to consider.

In Philippians chapter 2, Paul alludes to verse 23 of this chapter, referring it to Christ. How does Paul's use of Isaiah's expression develop the themes of this chapter and show their surprising fulfilment? At the heart of the argument of chapters 40-55 of Isaiah, the most sustained and powerful argument for monotheism in the Old Testament, is the uniqueness of the Lord over against all of the claims of the idols of the nations. It is important to recognise here that the point of the prophecy is not the more abstract claim that there is only one God, but that the Lord alone is God.

The gods of the nations and their idols are nothing. The Lord is unique as the creator, as the master of history, and his uniqueness and supremacy will be so manifested in history that all will have to acknowledge him as God over all. All of his supposed rivals will be shown to be no gods at all and utterly humiliated.

We might here think back to other events within the history of Israel. One of the effects of the plagues during the exodus from Egypt was to demonstrate the Lord's supremacy and power in each of the realms of which the Egyptian gods were supposed to be the Lord's. Likewise, in 1 Samuel chapter 5, when the Ark of the Covenant was taken into captivity by the Philistines, it was placed in the temple of Dagon their god as a sort of prize, supposedly demonstrating the supremacy of the Philistine god over the god of the Israelites.

However, Dagon's idol ended up falling prostrate before the Ark of the Covenant, and after they had raised it up again, it fell over once more, its head and its arms breaking off. Here once again the Lord is declaring and demonstrating his supremacy over the gods and the false idols. In chapter 41, the Lord summoned the nations for a trial, in which the competing claims of the gods were to be tested.

Israel are the witnesses of the Lord's power and sovereignty, and can, even as they suffer for their sinful rebellion, testify to the fact that he foretold what was to occur long in advance, and that now it is coming to pass. The chapter begins with a depiction of the false gods and their idols. They are seemingly bowing in humiliation, being taken away as a burden upon animals as they have been defeated.

Bel means Lord, and refers to the chief of the gods. Its meaning was similar to that of Baal, a title originally used of the god Enlil. It came to apply to Marduk instead.

The connection between Marduk and Bel can be seen in Jeremiah chapter 50 verse 2. As in Jeremiah, the defeat of the city of Babylon is seen as a humiliation of its gods, and the taking of the idols is another form of humiliation of them. As the idols had come to stand for the false gods with the worship that was accorded them, so in the humbling and removal of the idols, the gods themselves would be humbled. Nebo was another important god, the son of Marduk, and the importance of these two gods can be seen in the way that many of the Neo-Babylonian emperors were named after them.

Nabopolassar, Nebuchadnezzar, Nabonidus, and evil Merodac all had these gods as parts of their names. Perhaps we could see the bowing of these idols as related in some way to the bowing of the idolaters in chapter 45 verse 23, where the Lord declares that every knee will bow to him. These false gods and idols have become a burden to be borne by their worshippers.

Far from actually bearing the burdens of their people, they themselves have just become more weight to be carried away into captivity. This could not contrast more with the Lord's relationship with his people. The house of Jacob has been borne by the Lord from their first origins, and the Lord will continue to bear them for the rest of their existence.

He is the one that made them, and he is also the one who will redeem them. Once again, the Lord underlines the point in words similar to those found at several other points in this trial against the gods. Once again, the Lord speaks of the manner of the idols' construction, the materials of which they are made, and the ways in which they are set up.

The manner in which the idol has to be carted around and then lifted up and set in its place is an illustration of how helpless the gods are to bear those that worship them. Their images must be borne around by their worshippers. They cannot bear up their worshippers in the time of their distress.

Once again, the Lord's declaration of his uniqueness, followed by a polemic against the gods and their images, is followed by a summing up of the argument, calling the people to remember who God is and their relationship to him. Once again, the people are to take confidence in the fact the Lord can declare what is to take place before it has happened. There is no other god like him.

His supreme authority stretches from the dawn of creation itself, and his purposes will stand to the end. As in a number of the other points of this trial against the gods, the Lord's stirring up of Cyrus is seen as evidence of his supremacy and his authority in history. In verses 2-3, Who stirred up one from the east, whom victory meets at every step? He gives up nations before him, so that he tramples kings underfoot.

He makes them like dust with his sword, like driven stubble with his bow. He pursues them and passes on safely. By paths his feet have not trod.

The message of this chapter is addressed to a people who are unfaithful, a stubborn and rebellious people who are said to be far from righteousness. The meaning of the term righteousness in verse 12 is most typically understood in relationship to the righteousness spoken of in verse 13, the righteousness that, in contrast to that which seems far off in verse 12, is brought near. This righteousness is the righteousness of the Lord, the salvation that he brings in fulfillment of his covenant, setting the world to rights.

This could be taken either in a literal sense, that they are not experiencing the salvation of the Lord because of their unbelief, or in an ironic sense, that they think themselves far away from the Lord's righteousness, but the Lord's righteousness and salvation is in fact near at hand. John Oswald, unpersuaded by these readings, argues that it is more likely to refer to the fact that they are not righteous in believing the Lord. This then is a reference to their faithlessness, not to the distance, whether seeming or real, of the Lord's salvation from them.

In this way it might be a contrast between the Lord's faithfulness to the covenant and his commitment to set things to rights, and the deep unfaithfulness of the people, and the fact that far from setting things to rights, they are committed to injustice. However, the Lord's salvation does not ultimately depend upon the faithfulness of his people. Out of the Lord's unilateral initiative, the Lord is going to bring about his salvation.

He is going to re-establish Jerusalem and the nation for his glory. All of this will be for his own namesake, as a demonstration of his character before the eyes of the nations. A question to consider.

The specific gods, Bel and Nebo, are mentioned in this chapter, not just the generic gods and idols that have been mentioned in previous ones. Where else in scripture do we see the humiliation of specific gods that are mentioned within the text? What might we learn more generally about the place that the false gods and their idols have within the larger story of redemption? Chapters 41-48 of Isaiah are a sustained argument for monotheism, presenting the Lord as supreme over all of the false gods, their images and their worshippers, unique as the creator of all, the master of history, and as the one whose sovereignty will be publicly demonstrated, so that all knees would bow before him. The Lord's sovereignty would especially be demonstrated in the humiliation of the false gods of the nations, and as the Lord's word declared long in advance concerning Cyrus proved effective and true.

Chapter 46 described the shaming of Bel and Nebo, chief gods of the Babylonians, and the futility of idolatry more generally. In chapter 47, the focus turns to the city of Babylon itself. In the earlier oracles against the nations, in chapters 13-23, Babylon was especially prominent.

It headed the list of the people subject to the Lord's judgment, with Tyre at its conclusion. Chapters 13 and 14 are almost entirely devoted to judgment upon Babylon,

with Babylon mentioned again in chapter 21. The oracles against the nations, while probably largely delivered in the years running up to 701 BC, when Sennacherib and the Assyrians would come up against Jerusalem, also seem to foreshadow the later judgments that would occur at the end of the 7th century and join the 6th, with the rise and fall of the Neo-Babylonian Empire.

Here, however, in chapter 47, the fall of Babylon to Cyrus in 539 BC is more directly foretold. In the earlier oracles against the nations, we saw that Babylon and Tyre were great world cities of their day, their glory and splendor setting them apart from other cities upon the land and the sea, respectively. As such, they could stand for the Lord's judgment upon the pride of man more generally.

In chapters 24-27, we also saw something akin to the archetypal opposition between the city of man and the city of God. Given Babylon's prominence and significance, it was a potent symbol of the city of man, and as John Oswald notes, as the antipole of the city of God, its downfall was an oracle of salvation for Zion. As such a symbol, the passages concerning Babylon's downfall resonate long after Babylon's day, not least in the book of Revelation, where the city that is overthrown in the Lord's judgment at the end of the age is referred to as Babylon the Great.

Babylon is represented as a wealthy young virgin, accustomed to the luxury that comes with its privileged status. Zion is also often pictured in a similar manner. The Lord will utterly humiliate Babylon in its pride, devastating it and stripping it of its former glories.

The virgin, who formerly enjoyed all of the finery of nobility, would be reduced to grinding flour at the millstone, some of the most menial of work as a slave. She would be divested of her garments as a rich woman, and would have to dress as a regular labourer, walking through the irrigated fields. Babylon's nakedness would be uncovered.

Such descriptions are used elsewhere of the humiliation of proud cities, for instance of Jerusalem in Ezekiel 16, verses 36-39. Thus says the Lord God, And bring upon you the blood of wrath and jealousy, and I will give you into their hands, and they shall throw down your vaulted chamber, and break down your lofty places. They shall strip you of your clothes, and take your beautiful jewels, and leave you naked and bare.

Uncovering nakedness is an image of shame and the greatest humiliation, perhaps also implying rape. The image also suggests exposure of the true character of the city, especially in its moral character. Babylon will be seen for what it is.

Verse 4 frames the declaration of Babylon's downfall as a glorious message of salvation for Israel. The great oppressor city is being overthrown by the Lord, and the oppressed are, by implication, being liberated. Verses 5-11 present a series of indictments against Babylon and the consequent sentence that will be enacted upon her.

In the statements that the Lord attributes to Babylon, it is evident that Babylon in its pride fancied that it was as God. I shall be mistress forever, and I am, and there is no one besides me. In making these claims, Babylon is attributing to itself what is only true of God, directly attacking the uniqueness of his deity and parodying his own words concerning himself.

If these chapters are focused upon the monotheistic claim that the Lord alone is God, against all pretenders to his throne, Babylon is another of the powers claiming of itself what belongs to God alone. If Babylon enjoys glorious might and splendour, it is only because the Lord has established them in his providence. Yet Babylon was unwitting of the fact that all its majesty and dominance was received from the Lord's hand and could just as easily be removed.

He had empowered Babylon to be his instrument of judgement upon his unfaithful people. However much as the axe of Assyria was earlier judged by the Lord, so Babylon would also be humbled for its pride and presumption. Babylon fancies itself invulnerable and hubristically imagines itself beyond the reach of the Lord's judgement.

Its majesty would never fade, its might would never fail. It considered itself immune to the depredations that it inflicted upon others. It would never be bereaved and bereft as they were.

It was secure at the pinnacle of the food chain. It would never be widowed, stripped of the power of kings and gods, nor lose its children, its people falling at the hands of foreign powers. Apart from its military might, Babylon believed that it enjoyed further protection on account of its sorceries, like a force field surrounding it on all sides.

It felt secure in its idolatry, oppressive might, wicked enchantments and the shrewdness of its wisdom. By these things it considered itself to be in control and that nothing could displace it from the top of the pile. They also discounted a god or any other power who could expose their sin and hold them accountable for it.

No one sees me. Yet evil would come upon the city that fancied itself secure in its evil. All of a sudden it would be struck with disaster, from which there would be no escape and for which there would be no atonement.

Having declared the futility of their enchantments, the Lord sarcastically encourages Babylon to throw its weight into its sorceries and magic nonetheless. Perhaps it will work out for them. Perhaps their magic will prove a match for the creator of all.

Likewise, maybe the stargazers and astrologers of Babylon would secure its deliverance in its hour of need. Of course, all such bases of trust are vain and would fail Babylon in the hour of the Lord's visitation. They would all be like stubble before the terrible consuming fire of the Lord's judgment when he arrived.

They would be entirely forsaken by those in whom they had once trusted, abandoned by any to whom they would have once looked for deliverance. A question to consider. How does this chapter expose some of the ways that a nation can make an idol or false god of itself? Azar chapter 48 concludes the section of the book introduced by chapter 40 which runs from chapter 41.

The Lord assembled the nations for a great trial, exposing the emptiness and powerlessness of the false gods, idols and the proud idolaters. The Lord alone, the creator of all, is the sovereign of history. The Lord's sovereignty in history would be publicly demonstrated over all pretenders to his throne, and all would ultimately bow the knee in submission before him.

The primary way that this sovereignty of the Lord would be made known would be in his words taking effect. Osiris, the man that the Lord stirred up in the East, would overthrow Babylon. In the downfall of Babylon, the Lord would judge the proud oppressor, delivering his people and establishing Zion.

Gary Smith discusses the ways that many commentators have questioned the unity of this chapter on the grounds of its seeming contradictions, tensions and incongruities. There are statements that seem at first glance to be at odds with each other. In verse 6, for instance, we are told, From this time forth I announce to you new things, hidden things that you have not known.

In verse 16, however, we read, Draw near to me, hear this. From the beginning I have not spoken in secret. From the time it came to be, I have been there.

Then, as Smith notes, people see apparent tensions between verses giving assurance of deliverance and others proclaiming strong judgment, and other points where there are statements that seem to be out of context, such as at the end of verse 16. However, these objections, he argues, can be answered. He draws attention to research suggesting the literary unity of the chapter, a unity manifested in repeated words and keywords distributed throughout, in continuing themes, a tone of rebuke, and a balanced structure between the first 11 verses of the chapter and the second 11 verses.

John Oswald also highlights the fact that the force of some of the supposed tensions arises in part from the assumption that the chapter belongs to the period just prior to the return from Babylon and addresses only the exiles there in anticipation of their soon return. Brother Charles, while giving much more weight to the arguments of those who believe that there has been significant reworking of the original text over time than most conservative commentators, argues that the change in form and function of the text from chapters 41 to 47 preceding it is best accounted for by its role in its context as the conclusion of those chapters. This chapter, he argues, turns to address Israel's unfaithful response to the promises, and also marks another transition as the figure of the servant starts to come to the fore as Cyrus recedes in his understanding.

It is worth bearing in mind that when considering such issues, questions of form and genre criticism can raise their heads. Form criticism typically seeks to identify the original form that parts of the scriptural texts had in their supposed oral pre-existence. In their quest for these original forms, scholars often hypothesized a corresponding *sitz in Leben*, or situation in life for them.

A Song of Ascents, for instance, would be sung as worshippers ascended towards Zion during one of the pilgrimage festivals, and once one considers this original context, the actual texts of such psalms make more sense. In the case of things like the Songs of Ascents, this is definitely a fruitful line of inquiry. However, far too often the result of such a quest has been the fragmentation of texts into a mishmash of different and contrasting forms, for each of which there is a highly speculative original context in the worship or life of Israel.

The result can be a text that is left with little unity. Scholars have rightly become much more suspicious of this approach over the last 50 years, recognizing the violence that it does to the text as our proper object of inquiry. Nowadays, many of the concerns of traditional form criticism are dampened within the field of biblical studies, scholars being more narrowly focused on the consideration of questions of genre, less prone to flights of fancy about what supposedly lay behind the text.

This doesn't mean that such questions should simply be dismissed, nor for that matter that they necessarily fragment the text. For instance, someone like John Watts proposes that we read Isaiah as a sort of prophetic drama, with different speakers, a dialogic form, and a progression in the consequent conversation. For those inclined to read such prophecies as a series of prophetic monologues, changes in mood and voice can be jarring.

However, if it were originally a more dramatic form of text, with multiple voices in succession and progression in conversation, many of these shifts can be more readily accounted for. While Watts' approach encourages an extensive speculative attribution of different texts to different speakers throughout the book, we would probably much better appreciate the unity of the prophecies if we gave different voices and speeches internal to the prophet's words a little more breathing room, so as to give more attention to the alternations between and progression through them. Furthermore, recognizing some of the ways in which certain prophecies can resemble drama can also be helpful.

The Lord is often not directly addressing his people through the prophet, although often he is. Sometimes the prophet is rather performing a divinely inspired dramatic conversation, with the people more in the position of an audience to a drama than as its direct addressees. At points the prophet might be addressing a personified Babylon, the next he turns to look at his audience in Jerusalem directly in the eyes.

Without going to the lengths that some such as Watts do, greater recognition of the



likely more dramatic character of prophetic performance might potentially help to relieve some of the tensions and incongruities that we might otherwise feel when flatly reading such prophetic texts, and avoid some of the fragmentation that results from certain forms of form criticism. This certainly doesn't answer all of the problems raised by some of the apparent jarring shifts in such texts, but it should be part of our conceptual repertoire in responding to them. The term here and related terms are prominent throughout this chapter, setting the tone for much of it.

Fittingly, the chapter begins with the Lord charging Israel to hear. Verses 1 and 2 contain a litany of descriptors of Israel, House of Jacob, who are called by the name of Israel, who came from the waters of Judah, who swear by the name of the Lord and confess the God of Israel, who call themselves after the Holy City, who stay themselves on the guard of Israel. By this extended address, piling up the sorts of affirmations of privileged covenantal standing that the people would make, the Lord is foregrounding the identity that they claim for themselves, and grounding his challenge to them upon it.

Doubtless Israel bore the name of the Lord, but in their gross hypocrisy they were bearing it in vain. Israel were the witnesses of the Lord throughout their history, who could testify to the fact of his deity against the nations. In his past dealings with them, he had foretold his great deeds in advance.

For instance, he had foretold slavery in Egypt and the Exodus to Abraham, way back in chapter 15 of Genesis, and also by Joseph. And centuries later he had brought it all to pass, even against all odds. Less stubborn and rebellious Israel would attribute the Lord's great deeds to their idols and false gods, the Lord had announced what he would do in advance.

When what the Lord foretold came to pass, Israel had no excuse, but had to acknowledge the Lord's hand. Having heard the word of the Lord concerning future events, and having seen those words come to pass, Israel should bear testimony to the certainty of the Lord's word. Prophecies had been fulfilled before their eyes, and they should now be able to declare that the Lord alone is God.

Now, however, the Lord is going to show them new things, what he will accomplish through Cyrus and in bringing down Babylon. The Lord didn't reveal all his purposes for the future at once, not wanting his people to become presumptuous, thinking that they know it all, and forgetting that it was the Lord who would reveal these things to them in his own appointed time. Many understand the things being revealed to refer to the fulfillment of the prophecies, seeing this as an argument against the dating of the prophecy to the lifetime of Isaiah, arguing that it must come from around 539 BC.

Oswald disputes this, claiming that it is far from straightforwardly apparent that the things being created and announced are the fulfilled events, rather than being new prophecies concerning an event in the future that the Lord would bring to pass and that

would demonstrate his sovereignty. The Lord's intent in revealing his purposes to them before they came to pass was to confirm them in their trust in him, not merely to satisfy their curiosity, or even to give them the sense of control that so often comes with knowledge. We see this principle in Deuteronomy 29.

The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law. Due to the people's stubborn rebellion and unbelief, the Lord had not revealed things to them that he might otherwise have done. Such knowledge wouldn't have encouraged their faith, but would have fuelled the complacent presumption.

At the beginning of this chapter, the Lord described Israel in a way that underlined the ways in which Israel appealed to the name of the Lord in their self-understanding. However, Israel bore the name of the Lord in a way that led to the Lord being blasphemed among the nations. When the Lord restored his people, it would not be on account of their faithfulness, which as a rebellious nation they didn't have, but on account of the Lord's jealous commitment to his glory.

The Lord would not give his glory to any false god. This is a similar principle to that articulated in Ezekiel 36, verses 21-23. But I had concern for my holy name, which the house of Israel had profaned among the nations to which they came.

Therefore say to the house of Israel, Thus says the Lord God, It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am about to act, but for the sake of my holy name, which you have profaned among the nations to which you came. And I will vindicate the holiness of my great name, which has been profaned among the nations, and which you have profaned among them. And the nations will know that I am the Lord, declares the Lord God, when through you I vindicate my holiness before their eyes.

The chapter breaks down into two halves, the second half beginning in verse 12. Verse 12 recalls verse 1, the Lord summoning his people to attention. Yet now the focus is upon the Lord's identity, and the fact that he has called Israel, not upon Israel's presumptuous identification of itself by its relationship with the Lord, even as it was mired in hypocrisy.

The Lord's statements here recall the arguments of the preceding chapters. He is the Creator, the one who has made all things in both heaven and earth. He is the first and the last, the Eternal One, who is at the beginning as the Creator, and at the last as the Judge and the recognized Lord of all.

Summoning them all to assemble, the Lord asks again, Who has declared the things that are going to come to pass? The Lord has appointed Cyrus, this man stirred up from the east, and the Lord is going to achieve his purpose through Cyrus upon Babylon and the Chaldeans. Lest any be in doubt that it is he who will do this, verse 15 begins with two

independent first-person singular pronouns, and is followed by a first-person singular verb. It is the Lord's purpose and power that is going to be operative throughout.

His success would be an expression of the Lord's will. From the beginning of the creation, which is the beginning which verse 16 most likely refers to, the Lord has been a God who speaks, who declares his purposes to his people, and brings to pass what he has made known. The conclusion of verse 16 has puzzled many commentators, and now the Lord God has sent me in his spirit.

There are different ways of understanding the figure speaking here. Many commentators have understood the voice here to be that of the Messianic Servant, who appears again at the beginning of the next chapter. The expression here is similar to that which we have of the Servant in chapter 61 verse 1 for instance.

Charles, for instance, takes this line. Others, such as Smith, attribute these words to the Prophet himself. Yet others have argued that the statement here does not actually belong in this place.

Against the claim that these are the words of the Prophet, we might consider that most of the first-person speech in chapters 40 to 55 is the speech not of the Prophet, but of the Messianic Servant. While this consideration does give me pause, I lean towards understanding these as the words of the Prophet. They are also words that seem to introduce the section that follows.

The second half of verse 16 then should be understood with verses 17 to 22. In those verses the Lord speaks of himself as Israel's Redeemer, and once again using the familiar title, the Holy One of Israel. He is the one who teaches them to prophesy, to pursue that which is good for the nation.

Yet Israel has consistently rejected the Lord's commandments. Had they heeded him, they would have enjoyed peace and a society that was well-ordered in righteousness. They would have prospered and been numerous, never being cut off or destroyed.

The Lord is going to save Zion. He calls them forth from Babylon and Chaldea. However, it would have been so much better had such a salvation never been necessary.

Israel is a witness to the nations, and when they are redeemed, they should spread the joyful news of the Lord's deliverance of his people far and wide, so that all the nations could hear. The Lord has redeemed Jacob in fulfillment of all of his promises, fulfilling his word and his purpose given long ago. The redemption that he would accomplish would recall that of the Exodus.

When the Lord had first led them through the wilderness to the Promised Land, he had provided water from the rock for them along the way. Now, in a new Exodus, he would provide for them once more. The final verse of the chapter draws a lesson from Israel's

history that they should learn.

There is no peace for the wicked. They should have learned that lesson as they were sent into exile in Babylon. If they wanted to enjoy rest in the land upon their return, they would need to live accordingly.

A question to consider. Drawing threads together from this chapter, how would you say that Israel's unfaithfulness factored into the Lord's greater purpose for them as a nation? A new section of the book of Isaiah begins in chapter 49, albeit not without connections to that which preceded it. Chapters 40-48 focused upon the way that the Lord's stirring up of Cyrus from the East would demonstrate his sovereignty in history against all of the false gods.

While the figure of the servant appeared back in chapter 42 in the course of the Lord's public demonstration of the impotence of the false gods, from chapter 49 he moves to the centre of the stage, and the figure of Cyrus disappears, as does Babylon. As we move through the prophecy of Isaiah, the details in many respects become vaguer and less specific, as the Lord reveals the more distant and hazier features that are visible on the prophetic horizon. Isaiah chapter 49 begins with the second of what many scholars have termed the servant songs.

The first servant song was in chapter 42 verses 1-4. In chapter 49 the servant himself speaks. The character of the figure of the servant is not immediately apparent, it requires closer attention to discern.

At points the servant seems to be identified as Israel, perhaps as a personification of the nation. Verse 3 of this chapter, for instance, might suggest such an identification. You are my servant Israel, in whom I will be glorified.

However, in verse 6 the servant stands over against Israel as a distinct figure from it. It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to bring back the preserved of Israel. Earlier in the book, in chapter 41 verses 8 and 9, for example, Israel was referred to as the Lord's servant.

As the servant emerges into clearer view, his royal characteristics become more apparent. Yet these royal characteristics should not blind us to the fact that he also has prophetic characteristics. He is a bearer of the word of the Lord, and the fact that some have identified him with the prophet himself is not a position entirely without supporting argument.

John Oswald remarks upon similarities between the language the servant uses of himself here and language elsewhere associated with prophetic initiation, mentioning Jeremiah 1 verse 5 as one such example. Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you, I appointed you a prophet to the nations. Some

commentators argue that the reference to the body of the mother of the servant here rules out the possibility that this might be a collective figure, while it might weigh in favour of the position that this is an individual, I do not believe that it is at all conclusive.

Similar language is used of the nation in chapter 44 verses 1 and 2, but now hear, O Jacob my servant, Israel whom I have chosen. Thus says the Lord who made you, who formed you from the womb and will help you. Fear not, O Jacob my servant, Jashoran whom I have chosen.

Doing justice to both collective and individual dimensions of the figure of the servant, it seems to me that the royal character of the figure is important. The king can represent and sum up the nation, when he acts he acts as the nation, while he can be positioned over against the collective, he is no mere individual. In 2 Samuel for instance people can talk about having shares in David the king.

Chapter 41 began with the summons to the nations to draw near, to assemble for judgment. Chapter 49 begins similarly. In chapter 41 the Lord declared to them the work of Cyrus, the man that he would stir up from the east, before later disclosing the figure of the servant at the beginning of chapter 42.

Now they are assembled by the servant himself, who is going to declare his mission. The servant was set apart for a special purpose of the Lord from his very womb. Much like Jeremiah in chapter 1 verse 5 of his prophecy, or the apostle Paul in Galatians chapter 1 verse 15, this underlines just how purposeful the Lord is in the fulfilment of his plan.

In speaking of his mouth as a sharp sword, the servant underlines the connection between his mission and the communication of the word of the Lord. We might here distinguish between the role of the servant and the role of Cyrus, who though anointed by the Lord, was not a bearer of the word of the Lord in the way that the servant seems to be here. The servant was hid until the appropriate time, hid in the shadow of the Lord's hand, perhaps a figure of intimacy, and also like a polished arrow in a quiver.

That image both connects predetermined purpose and preparation, the way that the Lord prepares this arrow, and might also suggest the way that the arrow, in its appointed time, would be fired suddenly and speedily, and would be aimed towards a precise target. Commentators give different suggestions for the way that the servant relates to Israel in verse 3. Gary Smith, for instance, argues that we need to see a break in the sentence between my servant and Israel. This would yield two distinct statements.

First, you are my servant, and then a second statement, Israel, in you I will glorify myself. The servant, then, in this reading would not be identified with Israel. John Goldengay, who identifies the figure here as the prophet himself, argues that the prophet is being referred to as Israel.

In chapter 48, it was revealed that Jacob, the nation, was insufficient to act as Israel, and now the prophet is being so designated, he will act as Israel. He will spearhead the mission for which the Lord set his people apart. Brevard Charles argues that there is likely a shift from chapter 42 here.

In chapter 42, the Israel in view was the nation. Yet here, the office and title of Israel has devolved upon a prophetic and kingly figure, who will act in Israel's stead, as they cannot act for themselves. Yet the servant does not seem to meet with success, describing himself as having laboured in vain.

Yet even in his sense of failure, he trusts himself to the Lord, looking to the Lord for his vindication. Very naturally, Christians have seen this as a reference to Christ, whose crucifixion by all appearances seemed to mark the utter failure of his mission. Nevertheless, he committed himself to the justice of God, and the Lord vindicated him in the resurrection and raised him up to his right hand.

The Lord does not directly answer the servant, in his sense that his mission has not met with success. Once again, we are told that the Lord had formed the servant from the womb for his purpose, and that this purpose was the restoration of Jacob and Israel, the restoration of the failed servant of the preceding chapters. The Lord is the glory and might of the servant, the one who equips him and honours him in his mission.

And the Lord declares that he is going to, as it were, raise the stakes. He is not just going to send his servant to bring back Israel, he is going to make him a light to the nations. Indeed, the servant is to be the Lord's salvation to the end of the earth, not merely bringing that salvation, but being that salvation.

The servant's mission is amplified and the scope of the Lord's redemptive purpose is expanded. The Lord addresses the servant as one deeply despised, abhorred by the nation, the servant of rulers. This is similar to language that we find later on in the servant songs, for instance in chapter 52, verses 14 and 15.

As many were astonished by you, his appearance was so marred beyond human semblance and his form beyond that of the children of mankind. So shall he sprinkle many nations, kings shall shut their mouths because of him. For that which has not been told them they see, and that which they have not heard they understand.

And then in chapter 53, verse 3. He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. And as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. There will be a dramatic reversal.

The one who is despised will be honoured, and the ones who once disregarded, rejected and mistreated him would bow in submission to him. This would all happen at the Lord's appointed time, in his day of salvation. Much as the servant was going to be the Lord's

salvation to the ends of the earth, he is going to be a covenant to the people.

This is language that we find earlier in chapter 42, verses 6 and 7. I am the Lord, I have called you in righteousness. I will take you by the hand and keep you. I will give you as a covenant for the people, a light for the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness.

The servant would be a personal manifestation of the Lord's favour and goodwill towards his people, of his keeping of his promises. As in chapter 42, the servant is one who is going to release captives, saying to the prisoners, come out. To those who are in darkness, appear.

Those who the servant will liberate are described as if a flock. The Lord will provide a way out of captivity for them, and all along that way the flock will find good pasture land. They will be protected from the inhospitality of the elements, and their ways will be made smooth.

They will be brought from all parts of the earth, from all points of the compass. The land of Syene here is almost certainly Aswan, the south of Egypt representing the furthest extremity of the civilised world in that direction. As in the case of various other deliverances and great deeds of the Lord mentioned in the book of Isaiah, this yields a response of praise in which the entire creation joins.

The heavens and the earth and the highest heights of the earth are all going to break forth in singing, joining together in collective praise of the Lord who has shown his mercy and his compassion upon his people. Yet in verse 14, Syene expresses its sense of desolation and abandonment. The Lord, Syene believes, has forsaken her.

The Lord's response to Syene is one of the tenderest passages of the book. The Lord brings forward the example of a nursing infant with its mother. Can the mother forget such a child? Certainly not.

Yet the Lord does not just compare himself to the mother. He argues that his compassion, concern and attention to his people exceeds that of such a mother. She could indeed forget her child.

He would never forget his people. Indeed, it is as if Syene were engraved upon his hands. The walls of Syene ever before his eyes.

Verse 17 refers to either the sons or builders of Syene making haste. It's quite possible that the ambiguity is intentional. They are both sons and builders.

The builders will raise up the walls of Jerusalem. But the sons are the returnees that are promised in the verses that follow. As the building's sons make haste to return, the destroyers make haste to leave.

Syene sees itself as bereaved and bereft. But the Lord tells her to lift up her eyes. For all corners, her sons and her daughters are returning to her.

Indeed, the problem is now not the desolation of her land, but the pressing question of how to fit all of her children within it. Will there be room for such a mighty company? Syene, who considered herself barren and forsaken, wonders where all of the children could have come from. The Lord, however, her husband, has not abandoned her.

He has returned to her, and he will raise up seed for her. Using an image familiar from the earlier part of the book, the Lord will raise up a signal to the peoples, and they will return the children of Syene to her. We might recall here chapter 11, verses 10 to 12.

He will raise up a signal for the nations, and will assemble the banished of Israel, from Assyria, from Egypt, from Pathras, from Kush, from Elam, from Shinar, from Hamath, and from the coastlands of the sea. He will raise a signal for the nations, and will assemble the banished of Israel, and gather the dispersed of Judah from the four corners of the earth. The great powers of the nations that had formerly terrorized Israel would now be her gentle guardians as if she were an infant.

Those who had once lorded over Israel would now lick the dust of their feet, placing themselves completely at the service of the people of the Lord. Their power no longer a terror. The question in Zion's mind is, how could such a thing be? How could the prey be snatched from such predators? How could captives and exiles be released from such tyrants? Yet the Lord's might is greater than that of the oppressive nations.

He is the one who will release them. He will fight against those who fight against Israel, and he will save Israel's children. He will bring the violence of Israel's adversaries back upon their own heads, something that the Lord expresses in imagery of cannibalism.

The predatory nations would consume their own flesh. In this, the Lord would demonstrate his sovereignty to all of the world. All of the world would see that the Lord, the God of Israel, the faithful redeemer of Jacob, is the only true God.

A question to consider, looking at the description of the servant of the Lord here, and what the Lord would accomplish through him, how can we see this as being fulfilled in Jesus Christ? In Isaiah chapter 49, Zion was spoken of as a widowed woman who had lost her children. Yet in the Lord's grace, her children were restored to her, and her land, once vacant and barren, so filled with her restored offspring, that there was barely space to contain them. Chapter 50 addresses, not a mother, but the children of a mother, who wonder whether she has been rejected and cut off.

In Deuteronomy chapter 24 verses 1 to 4, provision is made for cases of divorce, by which a man could send away a wife deemed unfaithful, by writing her a certificate of divorce. Jeremiah chapter 3 verse 8 also compares the Lord's rejection of the northern



kingdom of Israel to such a decree of divorce. However, the question of the Lord to his people here is where, if he has indeed utterly cast them off, their mother's certificate of divorce is.

Where is the evidence that he has so rejected her? Another possible situation where a woman was cut off from her husband, was where the family was in such terrible debt, that members had to be sold into slavery until the debt was repaid. Yet the Lord clearly does not have creditors to be repaid. The Lord is not anyone's debtor, nor has he committed any wrong for which he must make restitution.

The explanation for the sending away of Zion is solely to be found in the people's own sin. The Lord is disciplining his people for their iniquity and rebellion, but the fundamental relationship between the Lord and his people has not ended. The people's belief might be that this communication breakdown was on the Lord's side.

However, the Lord's follow-up questions explode this perception. The Lord asks why, when he came, no one was to be found, and why, when he addressed them, no one responded. It's not as if the Lord was silent in his relationship with Israel.

He persistently addressed his wayward people through the prophets, for instance, yet without response. Perhaps they simply don't believe that the Lord is able to redeem or deliver them. This would be a strange belief indeed.

Their God is the one who can dry up the seas and the rivers, much as he did in the deliverance of Israel at the Red Sea. He is the master of the very stars in the heavens, of both the chaotic forces of the deep and the great powers of the celestial heavens. Both the deep and the heavens often provide symbols of earthly powers.

In declaring his sovereignty over these realms, the Lord is also declaring his sovereignty over analogous human powers. He is the sovereign, both in the abyss of exile and in the throne room of kings. Zion has been unresponsive and resistant to the word of the Lord, her divine husband.

However, in verses 4-9, the voice of the servant, the one who was faithful where Israel was not, the one who would be the means of bringing back Jacob, is heard once more, in the third of the so-called servant songs. His is the voice of one who is faithful and responsive to the word of the Lord, one who hears and obeys. He is the exemplar of faithfulness to an unfaithful nation.

If Israel, in going after idols, became progressively more like them, unresponsive, insensible, immobile and hardened, hearing but not understanding, seeing but not perceiving, the servant, in his responsiveness to the Lord, is quickened in his senses and enlivened in his capacities. His tongue is equipped for action, perhaps recalling the way that his tongue was compared to a sharp sword in the preceding chapter. We might also

think of the way that Isaiah's lips were prepared for bearing the word of the Lord back in chapter 6, with one of the seraphim touching his lips with a burning coal.

Having been taught, the servant is able to speak with wisdom and skill in a manner that sustains and revives others. Each morning, the Lord opens the ear of the servant as that of an attentive disciple. In contrast to the nation, the servant is neither rebellious nor turns back from the Lord's instruction.

In the preceding chapter, in verse 7, the servant was described as one deeply despised, abhorred by the nation, the servant of rulers, and as lamenting that he had laboured in vain and spent his strength for nothing and vanity. In verse 4, the suffering of the rejected and mistreated servant comes into clearer view. In verse 6 here, the servant submits to cruel and shameful treatment, treatment that was intended not merely to cause pain, but deeply to dishonour.

We are not told more about what occasioned this mistreatment, nor those who showed it. However, the servant faithfully endures it, confident in the Lord's vindication. The description of the suffering yet resolute servant, with his face set like flint before his persecutors, is similar to that of suffering, rejected and cruelly treated prophets such as Jeremiah.

As part of his call in Jeremiah 1, verses 17-19, the Lord tells Jeremiah what he is to expect. But you, dress yourself for work, arise and say to them everything that I command you. Do not be dismayed by them, lest I dismay you before them.

And I, behold, I make you this day a fortified city, an iron pillar, and bronze walls, against the whole land, against the kings of Judah, its officials, its priests, and the people of the land. They will fight against you, but they shall not prevail against you, for I am with you, declares the Lord, to deliver you. In this, as in other respects, the suffering servant should be seen as being in continuity with the prophets, and not merely as a royal sufferer.

While I do not believe that John Goldengay and others who identify the servant with the anonymous prophet, who supposedly wrote what is called Deuteronomy, are correct in that identification, they are not mistaken in recognizing the prophetic character of the figure. The confidence of the servant in the teeth of such opposition is found in his assurance of the Lord's vindication. If the Lord is with him, what adversary or accuser could ultimately be successful against him? No matter how many or how powerful his opponents, they cannot withstand the sovereign power and justification of the Lord himself.

The legal overtones of the conflict here should not be missed. The apostle Paul almost certainly alludes to this passage in Romans chapter 8, verses 31-34, where he writes, What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who

did not spare his own son, but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died, more than that, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us.

Paul proceeds to compare Christians to those regarded as sheep to be slaughtered in the verses that follow this, probably referencing the next servant's song of chapter 52, verse 13 to chapter 53, verse 12. This suggests that Paul sees the fulfilment of the prophecies of Isaiah, not merely in Christ himself, but also in his people. In the concluding verses of the chapter, the servant's speech ends and another voice enters, perhaps that of the prophet.

The people are addressed, asking which of them fears the Lord, the fundamental posture of reverence that is at the beginning of wisdom, who obeys the voice of his servant, much as the servant himself heeds and observes the word of the Lord. Those who do, should follow the servant's example, trusting the Lord in the darkness, awaiting the vindication of the Lord's promised dawn. Their justification and deliverance would come in its due time.

In stark contrast, all of those who kindle their own fires, seeking alternatives to the Lord's vindication, in idolatry, sorcery, trust in worldly powers and other such things, are sarcastically told that they should walk by their light. However, they are warned that they will thereby end up in torment. A question to consider, where, prior to the day of Isaiah, might hearers of this prophecy have looked to for examples of suffering servants of the Lord? In Isaiah chapter 50, the exemplary faithfulness of the servant, who when faced with rejection and cruel treatment, trusted in the Lord's vindication, was seen against the grim backdrop of Israel's unfaithfulness.

The servant would be the Lord's means of restoring his wayward people. The people were exhorted to follow the servant's example in trusting in the Lord in the darkness. Chapter 51 begins with an encouragement to those who are pursuing righteousness among the people, presumably the same people as those who were described in verse 10 of the preceding chapter, as those who fear the Lord and obey the voice of his servant.

The opening eight verses contain three charges to listen, in verses 1, 4 and 8. In these we might be invited to recall the servant himself, who is the exemplary attentive disciple of the Lord, as we see in verses 4 and 5 of the preceding chapter. The Lord God has given me the tongue of those who are taught, that I may know how to sustain with a word him who is weary. Morning by morning he awakens.

He awakens my ear to hear as those who are taught. The Lord God has opened my ear, and I was not rebellious. I turned not backward.

The people chiefly addressed in these opening verses were presumably walking in darkness with no light, as described in verse 10 of chapter 50. This walking in darkness was not, as the images elsewhere used to suggest, a matter of living sinfully and with no regard for the Lord. Rather the darkness was that of the Lord's apparent silence and the lack of visible evidence of his presence and action in their situation.

In these first eight verses these people are encouraged, the Lord giving them reason to take heart. The first thing that the Lord encourages them to do is to look back to their ancestors Abraham and Sarah. The Lord is the great rock of his people, but Abraham and Sarah are also presented with related imagery, as a rock from which the people were hewn and a quarry from which they were dug.

The righteous who are addressed here might consider themselves few and beleaguered, greatly outnumbered by those walking by the lights of their own fires, rather than looking to the Lord. However Abraham and Sarah were even fewer in number in their own day, yet the Lord made of them a great people. Indeed, while there is a kinship that can be known to Abraham in being a member of the multitude of his descendants, there is a deeper spiritual kinship to him in being faithful and acting in terms of the Lord's promises, even in the most difficult of days, and when only the smallest minority in a time of general unbelief.

John Oswald remarks upon the fact that the verb for look in verse 2 is the same as that in Genesis chapter 15, where Abraham was instructed to look at the heavens and try to count the stars, to which his offspring were compared. Much as Abraham found assurance from looking to the innumerable stars that signified his descendants, so those descendants could find assurance by looking back at their forefather and seeing the extent to which the Lord's promise to him had already been realized. The waste places of the land could be restored by the Lord's gracious visitation, both the ruined city of Zion and the desolate regions of Judah.

These wildernesses would become like a new Eden. The second charge to attend comes in verse 4, addressed to a people the Lord claims as his own, his people and his nation. The Lord's just rule and instruction is going to go out and be a light to the nations.

The idea of the law going out from Jerusalem should be familiar from the key text of chapter 2 verses 2-4. It shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the house of the Lord shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be lifted up above the hills, and all the nations shall flow to it. And many people shall come and say, Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob, that he may teach us his ways, and that we may walk in his paths.

For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. He shall judge between the nations, and shall decide disputes for many peoples, and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks. Nations shall not

lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.

Likewise, the servant was described as a light to the nations in chapter 49 verse 6. The Lord is going to set the world to rights, and all the peoples await his redemption, and his mighty arm going forth to bring his salvation to the world. To those who might fear that the Lord's establishment of justice would be short-lived and fleeting, the Lord declares that his righteousness and salvation will endure longer than the earth beneath their feet, or the vast expanse of the heavens over their heads. The third charge to attend is in verse 7, and brings together elements of the preceding two charges.

Those who pursue righteousness were addressed in verse 1. Here it is those who know righteousness. These are encouraged not to be dismayed at the resistance and reproach that they, like the servant, will face. As in the second charge, this is grounded in the fact that the Lord's salvation and justice will endure, here outlasting all its and their adversaries.

Verse 9 most likely starts a new unit of the text. Oswald notes the repeated calls to awake, appearing in verses 9 and 17 of this chapter, and then again at the beginning of the following chapter. The unit rouses Zion to prepare for its coming deliverance.

It begins, however, with a cry to the Lord to awake, a sense of concern at the Lord's inaction and crisis. This great deliverance of the Exodus is described using the imagery of Rahab the great sea monster. In chapter 30 verse 7, Egypt was dismissed as Rahab who sits still.

In chapter 27 verse 1, the sea monster Leviathan was also used to illustrate the Lord's final great defeat of evil. Presenting great deliverances of the past in terms of the imagery of the defeat of such monsters of the deep, plays off the background of ancient Near Eastern myths. This presents the Lord as the one who has demonstrated the mastery claimed for the false gods in their myths.

In actual history, and also connects his providence and redemption in history with his rule over all of his creation. This remembrance of the Lord's great deeds of the past, however, appears in the mouths of a people who are calling upon the Lord to act in a comparable manner in their own day. Now scanning the horizon in hope of a deliverance and a manifestation of the arm of the Lord that doesn't seem to be appearing.

Back at the end of chapter 35, when Isaiah had spoken of the way of holiness, the highway that the Lord would create for his ransomed people to return upon, the final verse of the prophecy, and of the entire body of prophecies prior to the narrative section, read, And the ransomed of the Lord shall return and come to Zion with singing. Everlasting joy shall be upon their heads. They shall obtain gladness and joy, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

Almost the exact same words are found here in verse 11, but its relationship to its context here is less clear. How do we account for the repetition? And what is this statement doing in this specific context? Is it the answer to the question of the people? John Golden Gate suggests that we should read this as a continuation of the challenge of the righteous to the Lord. They have recalled the great deeds of the Lord in the past, both as manifestations of his power and as declarations of his intent.

And now they quote the Lord's promise back to him. These, we should recognize, are not just any old words from the earlier prophecies. These are the crowning words of the climactic eschatological vision of the Lord's salvation back in chapter 35.

The Lord had promised such a redemption. Would he bring it to pass? In verses 12-16 the Lord answers the people's cry of verses 9-11. Once again the Lord underlines his identity and his uniqueness.

He is the one who comforts his people. No other can do this. Furthermore, the fact that he is the comforter of his people should give them great confidence.

With the Lord as their comforter, why need they fear any frail and mere mortal man? The Lord is the creator and sustainer of all, before whom no oppressor will be able to stand. He confirms his saving intent to his worried people. He will both release and will provide for them.

They will not finally be destroyed. The God who is almighty over the tumult of the sea and its waves is the Lord their God. He has appointed them as his witnesses, placing his words in their mouths and covering them in the shadow of his hand.

The language here is close to that of chapter 49 verse 2, where it describes the servant. He made my mouth like a sharp sword. In the shadow of his hand he hid me.

Commentators differ on the question of the one who is being addressed in verse 16. Some believe that the Lord is speaking to the servant. Brother Charles argues that the people are extending the mission of the servant.

Perhaps we could see this as evidence of the restoration of the people to their initial calling through the work of the servant. The Lord is, as it were, planting a new heavens and a new earth as he establishes his people in this way. We should note the way that the covenant formula, I will be your God and you will be my people, bookends verses 15 and 16.

The people in verse 9 had called upon the Lord to awake and to act on their behalf. In verse 17, the second of the three calls to awake. The Lord repeats the words of the people's cry back to them.

Does the Lord need to awake? No. Jerusalem is the one that must awake from the stupor

of judgment, bracing herself for the Lord's redemptive action. She has drunk the cup of the Lord's judgment to its dregs and now lies in a hungover state, needing to be roused again to alertness and action.

The imagery of the Lord's cup of judgment should be familiar from passages like Jeremiah chapter 25 verses 15 to 17. Thus the Lord, the God of Israel, said to me, Take from my hand this cup of the wine of wrath and make all the nations to whom I send you drink it. They shall drink and stagger and be crazed because of the sword that I am sending among them.

So I took the cup from the Lord's hand and made all the nations to whom the Lord sent me drink it. Having been struck by the Lord's judgment, Zion and her children are in a terrible state, each unable to help the other in their sorry condition. The Lord, however, is going to meet them in their plight, reversing the situation.

Much as in Jeremiah chapter 25 the cup of the Lord's wrath will be handed to the oppressor and they will drink it and be brought low, Zion herself will be delivered from their clutches. A question to consider, how might remembrance be seen as a key theme in this chapter? In Isaiah chapter 52 the section that began in verse 9 of the preceding chapter continues until verse 12. In verse 9 of that chapter the people had called upon the Lord to awake, recalling His mighty deeds of old in the Exodus and also repeating the words of the Lord's promise that crowned chapter 35 at the climax of that earlier body of prophecies.

In His response to them in verse 17 the Lord had reassured them of His coming deliverance, responding to their petition that He awake by charging them to awake, to awake from their stupor of judgment and to brace themselves for His coming redemption. Chapter 52 also opens with another summons to awake, addressed again to Zion by the Lord. It perfectly echoes and answers the people's summons to Him in the preceding chapter.

Awake, awake, put on strength. It is the people who are really the ones that need to prepare themselves. Zion, drunk with the cup of the Lord's judgment, lying in the filth of her exile for her sins, is instructed not merely to get up, but to prepare herself for exaltation and the Lord's glorious visitation, clothing herself with strength and beauty.

The splendor and majesty of Jerusalem as the royal city and of Zion as the Lord's bride will be restored. Released from the defilement of the uncircumcised and the unclean, she would appear in her true God-given radiance, appearing as the Lord Himself sees her. John Goldingay observes the contrast between the city of Babylon, which in chapter 47 verse 1 was instructed to vacate its throne and come down and sit in the dust, and Zion, which is to stand up and shake off the dust and be seated on its throne.

These two cities, as at the end of Revelation, are juxtaposed, the elevation of the one

corresponding to the humiliation of the other, the liberation of Zion, is something that she is called to enter fully into. As she is released, she must arise and loose her bonds. She is going to be elevated to rule in the Lord's grace.

She must dress and comport herself accordingly. In chapter 50 verse 1, the Lord had asked His people, Where is your mother's certificate of divorce, with which I sent her away? Or which of my creditors is it to whom I have sold you? Behold, for your iniquities you were sold, and for your transgressions your mother was sent away. The Lord had neither utterly cast off His people in divorce, nor had He sold them to some third party to pay His debts.

In verse 3 of this chapter, the Lord returns to this point. There was no third party involved to whom the Lord had to pay her redemption. He would deliver them, without having to pay a debt or ransom to any other party.

At the dawn of their history as a nation, Israel had been delivered from the oppression of Egypt, where they had freely gone to sojourn in the time of Joseph. How much more would the Lord deliver His people when they were forcibly taken by foreign powers like Assyria and Babylon against their will, and not in payment of any debt that the Lord owed those nations? To the watching peoples and rulers, it might appear that the Lord had been outmatched by rival gods. They had destroyed His temple and stripped Him of His people, leading them all to blaspheme His name.

The Lord, however, will vindicate His name against all such adversaries, proving His name to His people and the watching world. Monotheism isn't an abstract theological proposition, but a truth that will be demonstrated on the stage of history. This section is concluded in verses 7-12 with a moving poetic portrayal of Zion's redemption.

The watchmen in the hard-pressed city desperately scan the horizon, hoping for signs of relief. Suddenly one of them raises his voice to the others, pointing out a figure faintly visible on one of the hillsides facing the city, running towards them. As this figure approaches, they recognize that the man is one of their heralds.

He is bringing tidings of their deliverance, of the victory of their God over their adversaries. As he nears the gate of the city, perhaps he waves his arms and calls out to the eager watchmen, telling them the joyful news, Your God reigns! The watchmen erupt in joyful shouts and songs, spreading the glad news to the entire city. The city, once devastated but now released, is invited to join in the song.

The Lord's sovereignty has been publicly demonstrated in His deliverance of them and the overthrowing of all of their oppressors. He has bared His holy arm before the eyes of all the nations, as verse 10 puts it. All this recalls chapter 40 verses 9-11, where a similar scene is described.



Go on up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good news. Lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good news. Lift it up, fear not.

Say to the cities of Judah, Behold your God! Behold, the Lord God comes with might, and His arm rules for Him. Behold, His reward is with Him, and His recompense before Him. He will tend His flock like a shepherd.

He will gather the lambs in His arms. He will carry them in His bosom and gently lead those that are with young. The scene is portrayed from the vantage point of Zion, but the exiles of the people are also addressed in verses 11 and 12.

These verses recall chapter 48 verses 20 and 21. He made water flow for them from the rock. He split the rock, and the water gushed out.

The exiles are exhorted to leave the land of their exile and to return, in a new Exodus-like event. Their return would not be a desperate flight, however, from a pursuing adversary, as in the departure from Egypt. While there would be similarities to the Exodus, in their enjoyment of the protection and presence of the Lord, they would be a peaceful and joyful procession, returning to the land with no enemies threatening to harm them.

In the concluding three verses of this chapter, the fourth and by most reckonings the final of the Servant Songs begins. It is here that the figure of the Servant comes into clearest view. The introduction, Behold my Servant, is the same as that of chapter 42 verse 1. The Servant is one in whom the Lord's hand will be revealed.

Through Him the Lord will demonstrate His sovereignty. The Servant is also the true messenger of the Lord, the one who attends to the Lord, and speaks His words wisely and faithfully. This passage concerning the Servant begins by speaking of His exaltation.

Although the path to exaltation will pass through the deepest suffering and mistreatment, He would be lifted up at the last. The Servant would astonish everyone. While one might expect the anointed Servant of the Lord to have the charm and beauty of David, the Servant is disfigured and disgraced, not someone who seems in the depths of his humiliation to be marked out for his exaltation.

The term that the ESV translates as Sprinkle in verse 15 has been rendered as Startles by many commentators, underlining the surprise and astonishment that the figure of the Servant provokes in these verses. Goldengay, however, argues that we should understand it as Spattering. The spattering of the nations might be related to the expiation that the Servant will accomplish.

The Servant would be an epiphany for the rulers of the nations, an unveiling of the Lord's purpose and arm, leading them to stand in an awestruck silence at the majesty of the Lord and the greatness of His deliverance wrought through this Servant. A question to

consider, how is the image of the Herald of Good Tidings in this chapter and in chapter 40 taken up in the New Testament? The fourth of the so-called Servant Songs of Isaiah, and the most well known, begins in chapter 52 verse 13. However, the bulk of it is in chapter 53.

The importance of this passage in New Testament and subsequent Christian thought is immense. It is referenced or cited on several occasions in the New Testament, sometimes in quite surprising ways. It was this passage that the Ethiopian eunuch was reading in Acts chapter 8, and from which Philip directed him to Christ.

The Apostle Peter develops an extended series of allusions to this passage in 1 Peter chapter 2 verses 19-25. I will give you an example, so that you might follow in his steps. After his allusions to Isaiah chapter 50, Paul likely alludes to this passage in Romans chapter 8, when he speaks of Christ interceding for us at God's right hand, and of Christians being regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.

He then directly cites it in chapter 10 verses 14-17. And how are they to preach, unless they are sent? As it is written, How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news! But they have not all obeyed the gospel. For Isaiah says, Lord, who has believed what he has heard from us? So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.

In Luke chapter 22 verse 37, Jesus reveals that he sees the word of Isaiah concerning his being numbered with the transgressors, as being fulfilled in his arrest, trial and crucifixion. In John chapter 12 verses 37-41, the gospel writer connects the unbelief of the people in response to the many signs of Jesus and his teaching, to verse 1 of the chapter. In chapter 8 verses 16-17 of his gospel, Matthew says that Jesus' healings and exorcisms were in fulfillment of the servants prophesied taking of our illnesses and bearing of our diseases.

Likewise, fulfillments of Isaiah chapter 53 are clearly alluded to in Christ's silence in his trials and his burial in the tomb of the rich Joseph of Arimathea. While most Christian readings of Isaiah chapter 53 focus narrowly upon the crucifixion of Christ, the New Testament authors see far broader fulfillment of its words in both Christ and his church. In its original context in the book of Isaiah, we have already had intimations of the fact that the servant is one who will suffer and be rejected before he would be vindicated.

Chapter 49 verse 4, But I said, I have laboured in vain, I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity, yet surely my right is with the Lord, and my recompense with my God. Chapter 50 verses 6-7 I gave my back to those who strike, and my cheeks to those who pull out the beard. I hid not my face from disgrace and spitting.

But the Lord God helps me, therefore I have not been disgraced, therefore I have set my face like flint, and I know that I shall not be put to shame. It is in chapter 53 however,

that the suffering of the servant and the great reversal that will occur when the Lord vindicates him, finally come into a crisper and clearer focus. The chapters that follow will build further upon this.

The two servant songs preceding this, albeit not the first in chapter 42 verses 1-4, were words of the servant himself, spoken in the first person. Here however we have third person speech concerning the servant. Earlier on Israel was spoken of as the servant, but as a blind servant who had failed to perform his task.

In chapter 49 the servant called by the Lord in a manner similar to the prophets was described as the one by whom the Lord would restore Israel to himself. When the Ethiopian eunuch pondered the meaning of this chapter, he questioned whether the servant described within it was the prophet himself. There are certainly similarities that we might see between the figure of the servant as described in this chapter and prophetic figures.

For instance, Jeremiah's account of his experience in Jeremiah chapter 11 verses 19 and 20 recalls Isaiah's words here. But I was like a gentle lamb led to the slaughter. I did not know it was against me they devised schemes, saying, Let us destroy the tree with its fruit, let us cut him off from the land of the living, that his name be remembered no more.

But, O Lord of hosts, who judges righteously, who tests the heart and the mind, let me see your vengeance upon them, for to you have I committed my cause. Jeremiah, a faithful prophet, is also a great sufferer. He is the weeping prophet.

Like Joseph, he is cast into a waterless pit by hostile brethren, led by a vicious descendant of Judah. He is then brought down into Egypt against his will. In all of this, the destiny of his entire people is particularly concentrated upon him.

The story of the assassination of Gedaliah and its aftermath has numerous allusions back to the story of the sale of Joseph. Recognizing the manner in which the servant is connected to Israel and to the prophet is important, even when we relate it primarily to Jesus. Jesus sums up Israel in himself, takes its burden upon himself, and as prophets like Jeremiah and others who preceded him, he bears the righteous judgment of the Lord upon a rebellious people as the innocent sufferer, albeit in a far more complete and perfect manner.

In addition to being a prophet-like figure, the servant also has royal features, being like a king who will be vindicated and exalted after suffering. We might, for instance, think of the experience of King David during and after the coup of Absalom. Much of the importance of this passage in subsequent thought comes from the way that it has inspired thought concerning the nature and the logic of the atonement.

We must be cautious not to lay too much weight upon this passage for determining questions of the mechanics of atonement, or for deciding upon a particular theory of the atonement. As in the Gospel accounts of the crucifixion, what we are given is a narrative of what will happen to the servant, not a theory of how it all works, something about which the scripture has surprisingly little directly to say. John Goldingay helpfully unpacks some of the terminology that has been used by commentators and theologians in order to understand what is going on here, terminology like substitution, representation, participation, identification, persecution, martyrdom, embodiment and vicariousness.

He writes, This could be illustrated by Moses' suggestion that Yahweh should blot him rather than Israel as a whole out of Yahweh's book. He would take their place. Representation, on behalf of, is illustrated by the position the people ask Moses to occupy at Sinai when they ask that he should speak with Yahweh on their behalf.

He then takes their place, in another sense, in acting as their representative. Participation, or identification, with, is illustrated by the strand of thinking in the Torah that sees Moses as sharing in the consequences of the Exodus generation's failure, and as thus also unable to enter the land. It is more fully illustrated by a prophet such as Ezekiel sharing in the experience of deportation to Babylon, as if sharing in the people's unfaithfulness and as the price of fulfilling a ministry to them.

Persecution, at the hands of, is illustrated by the stories of the people's attacks on Moses, and later by stories about Jeremiah, and by 2 Isaiah's own testimony. Embodiment, before, is illustrated by Ezekiel's living out before people's eyes, the grim implications of the fall of Jerusalem. Vicariousness, for, is illustrated by Job.

He is not his friend's representative, but his suffering embodies for them, and for readers, truths about a relationship with God, and possibilities about coping with suffering that can lead them on in a relationship with God, and in coping with suffering. Golden Gay rightly observes that Christian understandings of what is going on in Isaiah chapter 53 are often hampered by the narrowing of our theological frameworks that has occurred through the elevation of legal models for understanding salvation to the exclusion of others. Legal models are clearly appropriate, but they are not the only ones.

There are many facets to the salvation that Christ accomplishes, and we will need several models of the atonement interacting with each other to do any sort of justice to the reality. One of the challenges that we face in reading Isaiah chapter 53 is the identification of the various characters and speakers. As Peter Lightheart notes, there are at least three characters.

There is the one who speaks of the central figure as my servant, which, given the way my servant is elsewhere used, is evidently the voice of the Lord. Then there is the servant himself, generally spoken of using third person singular pronouns. Finally, there

is the more mysterious we.

At first glance, the we of verse 1 might seem to be a collective reference to the witness bearing prophets. However, closer examination unsettles this interpretation. The we in the verses that follow hide their faces from the figure of the servant and don't esteem him.

Most likely the voice here is that of Israel, the prophet being among them, bearing witness to the figure of the servant who has acted on their behalf while being rejected by them. The fact that the voice is Israel's own evidences the final success of the servant's mission. The expression the arm of the Lord was earlier used in chapter 51 verse 9, where the people called for the Lord's arm to awake and put on strength, acting in order to accomplish their deliverance.

Verse 10 of the preceding chapter spoke of the Lord bearing his holy arm before the eyes of all the nations. Here we see the form that the Lord's answer to his people's cry and his saving work takes. The arm of the Lord is revealed in the work of his suffering servant.

The origins of the servant are inauspicious. In the earlier chapters of Isaiah there are several references to the chopping down of forests and great trees, as just a stump will be left of the form and might of Judah and of the house of David. Indeed we might see the servant as a new shoot coming forth from scorched earth, a new ruler arising from a house that seemed dead, as in chapter 11 verse 1. There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his root shall bear fruit.

While people might expect a new ruler to be marked out by peculiar charm, a handsome appearance or elevated stature, the servant has none of these. His appearance is unprepossessing, and there is no manifest majesty to him, nothing about him that would single him out from anyone else for the beholder. He would be considered worthless and unworthy of any sort of particular attention.

Indeed, as one marked by suffering and sorrow, people would distance themselves from him. If you are looking for a leader or a figure to redeem the nation, you would look to the powerful, the attractive, the popular, the charming, the confident and the successful. The servant seems to have none of these qualities and is dismissed for this reason.

Yet Israel's impressions of the servant are greatly mistaken, as we see in verses 4-6. The man of sorrows carries the sorrows of the people themselves. Like Job's friends, the people, looking at the servant, consider that the Lord has singled him out for judgment.

His condemnation is evident from his suffering. However, the affliction with which he was struck was not an account of any sin on his part, but an account of theirs. John Oswald remarks upon the sacrificial overtones of terms such as bearing and carrying in verse 4,

recalling the animals within the sacrificial system of Israel upon whom sins could be laid.

Imagery drawn from the sacrificial system will be strengthened in what follows. The servant suffers cruelly, pierced, crushed, chastised and wounded. In the disfigured face of the afflicted servant, the nation should recognize itself, as they were described in chapter 1 verses 4-6.

Ah, sinful nation! A people laden with iniquity, offspring of evildoers, children who deal corruptly. They have forsaken the Lord, they have despised the Holy One of Israel, they are utterly estranged. Why will you still be struck down? Why will you continue to rebel? The whole head is sick, and the whole heart faint.

From the sole of the foot even to the head there is no soundness in it, but bruises and sores and raw wounds. They are not pressed out or bound up or softened with oil. The people, like a wayward flock, had all gone astray, rejecting the path of the Lord and bringing judgment upon themselves.

However, through his redemptive action in the servant, the bearing of his holy arm, the Lord had placed the iniquities of his rebellious nation upon his faithful servant. The servant who bears the iniquities of the people is himself innocent of any wrong. He submits to the oppression and humiliation without protest or resistance, like a sheep meekly going to its slaughter.

He was a willing victim, not one merely taken by violence, nor, in contrast to the lamb with which he is compared, was he unwitting of what awaited him. In the Gospels we see this in Jesus' silence before his accusers and those who would condemn him to his death, in addition to the way that he purposefully walked the path to Jerusalem, knowing the fate that awaited him there. He also bore his cross on the path to Calvary and stayed on the cross, even when he could have summoned legions of angels to deliver him.

The proper translation and sense of the first clause of verse 8 is unclear. Was the servant taken away by oppression and judgment? Was he taken away from oppression and judgment? Or was he taken away having been deprived of judgment? The context, as Oswald argues, most supports the first option, that the servant was, unlike Israel, cut off through injustice. He was cut off out of the land of the living.

This, as Goldengate recognises, could merely be a poetic way to refer to death, but even if it denotes death, it also connotes exile, and indeed could potentially refer to being expelled from human society. The death of Jesus, of course, was a sort of expulsion from human society. He was disgorged from the body politic, held up for rejection and ridicule, disowned and handed over by his people, forsaken by most of his disciples, and betrayed by one of those closest to him, even before he went down into the grave.

The servant seemed like one utterly removed and extinguished. To the eyes of others,

he had no children to bear his name, and with his death his memory would also seem to have died. This was a particularly terrible fate, for one's name to be completely blotted out.

Yet all of this was on account of the transgression of the people. The innocence of the servant, the fact that he is without moral blemish, is seen in verse 9. The connotations of the term rich, used in relation to those with whom the servant was buried, are difficult to determine. Is the term used more or less synonymously with the wicked, connecting the rich with the oppressors? Or does it have a less negative sense? Of course, in the Gospels we read that Jesus was buried in the tomb of a rich man, and a member of the Sanhedrin, Joseph of Arimathea.

Ironically, in his burial, he was placed in the tomb of one of the men of the ruling body that sought his death. The final verses of the chapter sum up the larger message of the passage, declaring the outcome of it all, and the Lord's purpose within it. Judging by the appearance, the servant seemed to be condemned by the Lord, marked out for judgment.

However, the Lord's will was being realized through the dreadful crushing of his servant. The Lord did not merely permit the suffering of his servant, but actively willed it. This, of course, is an important claim concerning Jesus in the apostolic teaching.

In Acts chapter 2, verses 22-24, in Peter's sermon on the day of Pentecost, Men of Israel, hear these words. Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God, with mighty works and wonders and signs that God did through him in your midst, as you yourselves know, this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men. God raised him up, loosing the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by it.

Also in Acts chapter 4, verses 27-28, For truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place. The purpose of the servant's suffering is to serve as a trespass offering. Although the servant seems to be utterly cut off, the successful offering of his sacrifice will mark a turning point.

The servant will have a generation, an offspring, and his name will not be blotted out. His life will be extended, and the purpose of the Lord, which would connect with the arm of the Lord mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, would prosper with him. While Christians rightly see the resurrection of Jesus in this verse, such a verse could also refer to an experience like that of Job, so we should beware of reading too much back into it.

The servant, having passed through his bitter suffering, will be satisfied, having achieved his purpose on the other side. We should probably read the words, by his knowledge, in

relation to the servant's being satisfied, rather than in connection with the justification that he achieves. The servant, here also described as the Lord's righteous one, the exemplary Israelite, would make many righteous through his offering.

In the final verse, we see the Lord's vindication of his faithful and righteous servant. The servant is rewarded and exalted like a great victor. The one who was cut off from and by the people now stands at their head.

This is on account of his willing suffering with, and most importantly, for the transgressors. Suffering as he did, he bore the transgressors' sins, and now he makes intercession for them. This is how the Lord will redeem his sinful people and achieve his great purpose, bringing Israel back into right relationship with him.

A question to consider, how might the sacrificial system help us better to understand the work of the servant in this chapter? In Isaiah chapter 53, the figure of the servant was portrayed, and his great work, the work by which the Lord's hand was laid bare before the nations, was described. In chapter 54, we see a woman, who corresponds in many respects with the servant of the preceding chapter. John Goldingay writes, After the concentration on Miss Zion in most of chapter 49 verses 14 to chapter 52 verse 12, the passage brings about a sharp transition in the focus on a male servant.

The female figure then reappears in chapter 54, and as chapter 52 verse 13 to chapter 53 verse 12, follows on from chapter 52 verses 7 to 10, and develops some of its motifs, so does the portrait of the restored city in chapter 54 verse 1 to 17a, in relation to chapter 52 verse 13 to chapter 53 verse 12. As the servant is the object of contempt, the woman is the object of shame. As the servant is to be exalted, the woman is to be beautified.

As the servant will see offspring, so will the woman. As the servant will confound the nations and gain them as spoil, the woman will dispossess nations and settle towns they abandon. As the servant brings about shalom, the woman will enjoy a shalom covenant.

With chapter 55, this chapter presents the glorious fruits of the Lord's redemptive work in his servant. Its opening might recall chapter 49 verse 13, which comes at the climax of the description of the work of the servant in verses 1 to 12 of that chapter. Sing for joy, O heavens, and exult, O earth.

Break forth, O mountains, into singing. For the Lord has comforted his people, and will have compassion on his afflicted. This chapter celebrates the wonder of the Lord's deliverance, and the blessing of a renewed relationship between him and his people, after they have been put in right standing with him through the work of his servant.

In earlier chapters, Zion was pictured as a woman who was bereaved of her husband, was sent away from him, and robbed of her children. In chapter 51 verses 17 to 20, for



instance, Wake yourself, wake yourself, stand up, O Jerusalem, you who have drunk from the hand of the Lord the cup of his wrath, who have drunk to the dregs the bowl, the cup of staggering. There is none to guide her among all the sons she has borne.

There is none to take her by the hand among all the sons she has brought up. These two things have happened to you. Who will console you? Devastation and destruction, famine and sword.

Who will comfort you? Your sons have fainted. They lie at the head of every street like an antelope in a net. They are full of the wrath of the Lord, the rebuke of your God.

However, the barren and forsaken woman would be marvelously restored, something already described in chapter 49 verses 18 to 23. Lift up your eyes around and see. They all gather, they come to you.

As I live, declares the Lord, you shall put them all on as an ornament. You shall bind them on as a bride does. Surely your waste and your desolate places and your devastated land, surely now you will be too narrow for your inhabitants, and those who swallowed you up will be far away.

The children of your bereavement will yet say in your ears, the place is too narrow for me, make room for me to dwell in. Then you will say in your heart, who has borne me these? I was bereaved and barren, exiled and put away, but who has brought up these? Behold, I was left alone. From where have these come? Thus says the Lord God, behold, I will lift up my hand to the nations and raise my signal to the peoples, and they shall bring your sons in their arms, and your daughters shall be carried on their shoulders.

Kings shall be your foster fathers, and their queens your nursing mothers. With their faces to the ground they shall bow down to you and lick the dust of your feet. Then you will know that I am the Lord.

Those who wait for me shall not be put to shame. Barrenness is a very common theme in the Bible, most notably in the story of the great matriarchs of Israel, Sarah, Rebecca and Rachel. It is also a prominent theme at the beginning of the story of the kingdom, in Hannah, and at the beginning of the story of the gospel, in Elizabeth.

The Lord's overcoming of barrenness also connects with his gift of children of promise, not children born merely of natural virility and fertility, but children that are born through the Lord's overcoming of the weakness and insufficiency of the flesh. As in chapter 49, the woman who thinks that she has no children will have to enlarge the place of her habitation to accommodate all of her offspring. In this she would be glorified beyond the woman who was married with many children.

Her land would be repopulated, and her shame would be overcome. The shame of her barrenness and the disgrace of having seemingly been cut off by her husband for her

unfaithfulness would no longer be brought to her mind. The explanation for all of this is found in the fact that her husband is the Lord.

He is the one who both made her and will redeem her, and as the creator and Lord of the whole earth, his power is sufficient. As when the prophet Hosea took back the unfaithful Gomer, the Lord would call back Zion to himself. Verses 7 and 8 contrast the briefness of the period of time for which she was cast off, and the anger of that moment, and the everlasting love and the great compassion with which she will be restored.

Her restoration will not just be temporary. The Lord recalls the covenant with Noah, the promise that he would never again destroy the world with a flood. In a similar way, the overflowing flood of the Lord's wrath would never overwhelm and destroy Israel again.

The commitment of the Lord's steadfast love for his people is firmer and more enduring than the mountains and the hills. Having compared Zion to a forsaken and restored unfaithful wife, in verse 11 the imagery shifts to that of a city. The Lord's re-establishment of Zion is going to be a great glorification.

The Lord will rebuild it with precious and glorious stones placed in the most attractive settings. Zion's foundations and walls will be like the skilled work of a master jeweler, precious in his sight, something that he takes considerable care over, and a manifestation of his close concern and attention. Within the portrayal in Isaiah, Zion's relationship with her children was one of the most tragic aspects of her plight.

Her children were taken away from her, they were unresponsive to teaching, and they suffered great hardship. However, now her children will be taught by the Lord. In this we might think of the children of Zion taking on the character of the servant, who is presented as the great example of the attentive and obedient son.

As John Goldengate notes, the transition from the stones of the city to the children of the city is a shift that might be eased by the similarities of the words in the Hebrew. As the children of Zion are taught by the Lord, the healthy succession of the people is secured. One of the great tragedies of a nation or a people is when the relationship between the generations breaks down, either in decadence when the older generation does not lay up and prepare and advance itself into the future, or in revolution where the younger generation either turns its back upon or seeks to overthrow the legacy of their fathers.

A situation where each generation makes sacrifices for the next, while delivering a harvest on the sacrifices of the previous generation, is the ideal. The city will be established in righteousness. This righteousness might be the saving justice of the Lord, or perhaps it is the uprightness of a city that is ordered after His law.

The Lord would protect the city from all its foes, and any that rose against them would be destroyed. The Lord assures His people that because He is the One who created the

weapon and the One who wields it, no weapon raised against them will be successful. Likewise, all of their accusers would be dumbfounded by the Lord's vindication of His people.

Many elements of this chapter might recall the promise of the New Covenant in Jeremiah 31, verses 31-37. Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt. My covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the Lord.

For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord. I will put My law within them, and I will write it on their hearts, and I will be their guard, and they shall be My people. And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, Know the Lord, for they shall all know Me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the Lord.

For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more. Thus says the Lord, who gives the sun for light by day, and the fixed order of the moon and the stars for light by night, who stirs up the sea so that its waves roar, the Lord of hosts is His name. If this fixed order departs from before Me, declares the Lord, then shall the offspring of Israel cease from being a nation before Me forever.

Thus says the Lord, if the heavens above can be measured, and the foundations of the earth below can be explored, then I will cast off all the offspring of Israel for all that they have done, declares the Lord. In reading the end of this chapter, we should recall the end of the preceding chapter concerning the work of the servant. The servant would make many righteous, and the end of this chapter talks about the vindication of the people of the Lord.

We should connect the two. Likewise, we should see the servants of the Lord, as in some sense a multiplication of the servant himself. This is the seed, this is the generation of the servant that was promised.

A question to consider. In Galatians chapter 4 verse 27, the apostle Paul cites verse 1 of this chapter. How might an understanding of the context of the verse in this chapter help us better to understand what Paul is doing with that text in his epistle? Like chapter 54, Isaiah chapter 55 describes the blessings that flow from the purpose of the Lord achieved through the work of the servant, closing this section of the book.

Chapter 54 describes the restored city of Zion, and in this chapter we have summons to receive the blessings of restoration, to enter into the full enjoyment of God's bounty. John Golden Gaze sees two corresponding panels to this chapter. In verse 1 and verses 6 and 7 there is a summons.

In verses 2 and the first half of verse 3, and verses 8 and 9 there are reasons why the people ought to listen to the Lord. And then in the second half of verse 3 and verses 10 and 11 there is an accompanying promise. In verse 4 and the first half of verse 5, and verse 12 and the first half of verse 13, there is the consequence of the response to the summons.

And then in the second half of verse 5 and the second half of verse 13, there is the Lord's purpose achieved through it all. The chapter begins with a scene that we might imagine as a voice crying out in the marketplace. Yet the offer of this vendor is a most peculiar one.

He is offering drink and food to the thirsty and hungry, yet without any requirement of payment. The offer of water and food might suggest a situation of water shortage and famine conditions, perhaps as a result of war or siege. Both the drink and the food are offered openly, generally and freely, with no cost or restriction.

Elsewhere the gift of water to a parched land and a thirsty people is connected with the spirit. We might think of Jesus' offers of water in the Gospel of John, whether to the woman at the well or in the temple speech in chapter 7. Here it is specifically those who have no money who are invited to come. It is not merely the bare essentials that they are offered.

Wine and milk are also offered freely to any who will receive them. This rich fare is contrasted to what the people might otherwise spend their money upon and devote their labour to. Food and drink, that is not satisfying.

This offer of food is so that the people can have life and have it to the full. It is not merely an offer of physical sustenance. It is an offer of spiritual blessings.

Through the work of the servant there is great blessing and plenty for the people. And now the imperatives are calling people to enjoy what the Lord has brought about for them. In particular, the promise here is an everlasting covenant.

A covenant that will endure, that will not be at risk of being broken like the Mosaic covenant. The covenant in view here is the Davidic covenant. A covenant grounded upon the Lord's unilateral promises to the house of David.

This implicitly grounds the blessings that the people will enjoy in this restored Zion upon the work of the Messiah, whom we might reasonably identify with the suffering servant. Under the Davidic covenant, the fate of the nation is very strongly correlated with the faithfulness or unfaithfulness of their king. This is not merely on account of the way in which the king provides an example, either good or bad, but also because the Lord deals with his people through the person of the king.

In the troubled history of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah, we can see the failure of king

after king. However, one of the effects of the Davidic covenant is to direct people's hopes towards a king that will be enduringly faithful. A king who will secure the nation's standing and destiny.

People's eyes would thereby be raised to the awaited figure of the Messiah. David is here described as a witness to the peoples, a leader and commander for the peoples. David and his house were not just leaders of the nation, but also witnesses to other nations round about.

We might think about the influence of Solomon upon the region as people came to hear from him and to learn from his wisdom. The queen of Sheba coming from far off, for instance. One of the messianic hopes was that people from distant lands would learn about the Lord through the faithful king.

John Oswald suggests that against many commentators, the you that is in view in verse 5 is the Messiah or the servant, rather than the nation more generally. Other nations would come to the faithful servant, and this would all be because the Lord, here again described as the Holy One of Israel, had glorified him. The Lord's vindication of his faithful servant leads to the extension of the servant's reign.

In verses 6 to 13, we have a parallel section with verses 1 to 5. As in verse 1, it begins with an imperative and an invitation. The invitation here is to seek the Lord and to call upon him. The Lord is near and he can be found by any who will seek him.

The seeking in view here is not just asking for counsel of the Lord or seeking his answer to a particular prayer. Rather, it is a matter of seeking his presence in their lives. It is a matter of rejecting the ways of wickedness and seeking the ways of the Lord.

Any who will return to the Lord in such a fashion are assured of the Lord's compassion and pardon. All of the blessings described in this chapter are freely offered. The Lord is not withholding them from anyone.

He requests only people's recognition of their need, that they come without money, and the blessings that they are promised in response are bountiful. The Lord is not parsimonious. He eagerly desires to give his good gifts to people.

How, people might wonder, could this be, considering all the ways in which Israel had rejected the Lord? How could the Lord offer such a free pardon and such bountiful gifts? The Lord assures his people that his ways are above their ways and his thoughts above their thoughts. He will not deal with them as their sins deserve, treating them as they might treat their neighbour. The contrast between the heavens and the earth in verse 9 provides, as Oswald notes, a motif that continues in verse 10.

Precipitation in rain and snow comes from the heavens and gives life to the earth. In much the same way, the word of the Lord is that which gives life to the land. As the Lord

pours out his spirit upon a once parched earth, it will blossom with new life.

The Lord's word is the source of this life, the prophetic promise, for instance, that waters hopes in eager hearts. Much as in verse 10 and 11, heaven and earth are united in rain and answering fruitfulness, in verses 12 and 13, the people and the land are united. The land itself is described as rejoicing and breaking forth in clapping and singing as the people are restored to it.

The thorns and the briars that were described as taking over the land in the earlier parts of the book of Isaiah are now replaced by cypress and myrtle. As in verse 5, in verse 13, we see that the end of all of this is the glorification of the Lord and his name. While an initial fulfillment of this could be seen in the people's return from Babylon, it seems to have a broader reference.

In such a passage, we see the crystallization of the greater hope of Israel, of which there are partial realizations and glimpses in various times and places, but which still awaits its full realization. This is a word of hope and assurance to the heroes of the prophet, who, even in dark days, can, as they live by the word of the Lord, know something of this chapter's promise of sustenance and fruitfulness and the presence of the Lord. A question to consider, how do Davidic themes within this chapter pick up some threads from the earlier chapters of the book of Isaiah? Isaiah chapter 55 concluded the section of the book running from chapter 40 to 55.

From chapter 56 to the end of the book in chapter 66, we have the book's concluding unit. Those who question Isaianic authorship of the entire book typically divide these chapters from chapters 40 to 55, referring to them as Third or Trito Isaiah. They are frequently dated to the period after the return to the land from Babylon, following the fall of Babylon in 539 BC, and are often regarded as contemporaneous with Haggai and Zechariah, with which biblical scholars often identify common themes, such as Sabbath, a temple that has been threatened by enemies of the Lord, but with sacrificial practice still in operation, injustice and fasting.

Advocates of an earlier dating for this material, attributing it to the authorship of Isaiah, can respond by pointing out that many of these issues were perennial ones within Israel's life, with plenty of references to them in the pre-exilic period. In addition to this, there are key differences, for instance, between the pagan foreigners among the people that we see in books like Nehemiah and the proselytes who have joined themselves as faithful believers in the Lord, as we have here. The actual internal evidence that these chapters give us for dating the book is relatively thin.

Like much other material in Isaiah, the dominant horizon in many passages of this unit is an eschatological one. Various structures have been suggested for this unit. Gary Smith and John Goldengate both present extended chiasms that have been proposed for the entire unit, chiasms that differ at several points, yet coincide at many others.

Both of the chiasms that they mention centre upon chapter 61. Smith, however, questions whether the chiasm is really as strong as it initially appears to be. The unity of this section is not merely internal.

As Brother Charles notes, this section of Isaiah repeatedly returns to and picks up themes from chapters 40 to 55, so-called second or deutero-Isaiah, and that it also has several prominent themes in common with the opening 39 chapters of the book. It opens with a call to covenant faithfulness. It also picks up on the general invitation that is offered in the preceding chapter, addressing the eunuch and the foreigner in particular.

The work of the servant was as a witness to the nations. This chapter's discussion of foreigners joining themselves to the people of the Lord follows quite naturally on from that. Goldengate argues that the opening statement could be read, among other things, as a summary of the book to this point.

The keeping justice and doing righteousness to the first part, and then the salvation that is going to come and the righteousness to be revealed, to chapters 40 to 55. The call here is to act in keeping with the Lord's act of salvation, and the beatitude that follows, blessed is the man who does this, might remind us of the beatitudes of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. We might see the beatitude here as playing a similar role.

In addition to keeping his hand from doing evil and keeping justice and righteousness, the observance of the Sabbath is especially singled out. Some have seen this as evidence that this text most likely belongs to a post-exilic period, yet there are several such prophetic messages concerning the observance of the Sabbath in the pre-exilic period, for instance in places like Ezekiel chapter 20 or in Jeremiah chapter 17 verses 21 to 27. But if you listen to me, declares the Lord, and bring in no burden by the gates of this city on the Sabbath day, but keep the Sabbath day holy and do no work on it, then there shall enter by the gates of this city kings and princes who sit on the throne of David, riding in chariots and on horses, they and their officials, the men of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, and this city shall be inhabited forever.

And people shall come from the cities of Judah and the places around Jerusalem, from the land of Benjamin, from the Sheffler, from the hill country and from the Negev, bringing burnt offerings and sacrifices, grain offerings and frankincense, and bringing thank offerings to the house of the Lord. But if you do not listen to me, to keep the Sabbath day holy, and not to bear a burden and enter by the gates of Jerusalem on the Sabbath day, then I will kindle a fire in its gates, and it shall devour the palaces of Jerusalem, and shall not be quenched. In Exodus chapter 31, the Sabbath is presented as the great sign of the covenant given at Sinai.

It is a symbol of the people's liberation from slavery, but also a sign of their participation in the rest of the Lord from His creation. The Sabbath was the root from which all of the feasts of Israel were conjugated, the foundational feast. It was a day that was connected

with solemn assemblies.

It was a day in which servants and members of households should be given rest. It was a day for memorializing God's great deeds in the past. In these and other ways, the Sabbath was a condensed symbol of all that the covenant represented.

Observing the Sabbath properly involved entering into the rest that the Lord had given to His people, spreading that rest to others, memorializing the great deeds of the Lord, assembling with the people of God to worship, and many other such things that exemplify the marriage of the justice and righteousness of the people, and the revelation of the Lord's salvation and righteousness that is spoken of in verse 1. In verse 3, we are introduced to two key figures, the foreigner and the eunuch. Throughout scripture, we have examples of foreigners who join themselves to the people of God, perhaps most notably people like Rahab and Ruth. The eunuch is a figure that we do not encounter commonly.

Ibed-Milek, the Ethiopian eunuch in the book of Jeremiah, is perhaps the most prominent, at least prior to Acts chapter 8. To any foreigner who might wonder whether they could ever be full members of the people of the Lord, and to any eunuch who might think that on account of their being a eunuch, their name, memory, and legacy would be cut off, the Lord has words of encouragement and assurance. Deuteronomy chapter 23 verse 1 restricts those who have their testicles crushed from entering into the assembly of the Lord. Yet here the Lord assures such persons that they will have a monument within His house, and that despite their inability to bring forth natural offspring, they would have a name better than sons and daughters, an everlasting name that would not be cut off.

In this phraseology we might see a callback to Isaiah chapter 55 verse 13, which spoke of an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off. We might also think of ways in which the eunuch could be paralleled with the figure of the servant. The servant was cut off from the land of the living, and seemed to have no generation, yet he ended up seeing his seed.

A similar assurance is given to the foreigner. He would be made a full participant within the worship of the people, and his worship and sacrifice would be accepted. The Lord's house should be a house of prayer for all peoples.

At the time of the temple's first dedication in 1 Kings chapter 8 verses 41 to 43, King Solomon had prayed, Likewise, when a foreigner who is not of your people Israel, comes from a far country for your namesake, for they shall hear of your great name and your mighty hand, and of your outstretched arm, when he comes and prays toward this house, hear in heaven your dwelling place, and do according to all for which the foreigner calls to you, in order that all the peoples of the earth may know your name, and fear you, as do your people Israel, and that they may know that this house that I have built is called by your name. Back in Isaiah chapter 49 verse 6, the Lord had



declared his purpose to bring in the nations through the work of the servant. It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob, and to bring back the preserved of Israel.

I will make you as a light for the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth. This expression of the Lord's purpose is reiterated in verse 8. In verse 9 to the end of the chapter we have a surprising shift in the tone. There are also some challenging questions of interpretation.

Are the beasts of the field devouring the beasts in the forest? Or are the beasts of the field and the beasts of the forest devouring something else? Perhaps the flock of Israel? Is the Lord explicitly summoning these? Or is the Lord just describing their arrival? Are these foreign nations, or are they literal wild beasts that are devouring slain bodies? I am inclined to think of the beasts of the field as a broader reference to forces that would prey upon the flock of Israel. The watchmen of Israel are blind, and as a result cannot provide proper warning to the people. They are like sleepy guard dogs that cannot bark.

In a cultural context where dogs were seen as deeply unclean animals, this characterizes them as besides having no use, being defiling presences among the people. And what is worse, they are hungry creatures, constantly consuming, rather than feeding the flock. From dogs we move to shepherds in the second half of verse 11.

Shepherds with no understanding, who have rejected the true way, each turning after their own pleasure. They are described as decadent party goers, rather than people that you would want to trust looking after the flock. There is no one awake, alert and sober enough to raise an alarm for the people.

A question to consider, how might this passage help us to read the story of the Ethiopian eunuch in the book of Acts chapter 8? A new section of the book of Isaiah began in chapter 56. In the final verses of that chapter, the prophet described the unfaithful leaders of the people, who failed to act as effective watchmen, guards and shepherds, but were given to indulgence, and unmindful of those committed to their charge. The opening verses of chapter 57 belong with those verses that preceded them.

The wicked and irresponsible overseers of the people, on account of their failures in guarding the nation, and curbing injustice within it, have produced a situation where oppression and unrighteousness can run rampant. When such a situation arises, the righteous will be dismayed and the wicked emboldened, leading to a more general decay of the society, something that is described in Proverbs, such as Proverbs chapter 11 verse 10. When it goes well with the righteous, the city rejoices, and when the wicked perish, there are shouts of gladness.

Also, chapter 28 verse 12. When the righteous triumph, there is great glory, but when the wicked rise, people hide themselves. The whole society is much worse off, as judges

and rulers fail to vindicate the righteous.

The righteous are dying, many at the hands of oppressors, but no one is recognizing it, or acting to prevent it. From wicked, gluttonous and ineffectual rulers, we move in verse 3 to idolatry and spiritual adultery. The setting here seems to be one in which there was widespread idolatry in the land.

This seems out of keeping with the supposed context of so-called Trito-Isaiah, set within the land of Israel after the return from exile. Idolatry simply doesn't seem to be the same prominent issue within the post-exilic period. It really is not an issue that sticks out within the post-exilic prophets or the other writings from that period.

Rather, it fits far more naturally with the period prior to the exile, where many of the prophets, from Jeremiah to Isaiah to Ezekiel, directly address such idolatrous practices. The practices involved in such idolatry were known from the time of the Canaanites, mentioned in Deuteronomy for instance. In Jeremiah chapter 3 verse 6 for instance, we find descriptions that match some of those in this chapter.

Have you seen what she did, that faithless one, Israel, how she went up on every high hill and under every green tree, and there played the whore? Also in Ezekiel chapter 6 verse 13, And you shall know that I am the LORD, when their slain lie among their idols around their altars, on every high hill, on all the mountaintops, under every green tree, and under every leafy oak, wherever they offered pleasing aroma to all their idols. Here Isaiah describes the idolaters as sons of the sorceress, perhaps a way of characterising unfaithful Israel. Elsewhere in scripture, in Jeremiah for instance, Israel and Judah are described as adulterous women.

This is an image that is most developed within the book of Hosea. They are here described as marking the Lord, dishonouring him by their spiritual infidelity. What is meant by their opening of their mouth wide and lengthening their tongue is not entirely clear, though most likely the latter expression refers to the sticking out of the tongue in an act of derision.

The sites of their adulterous relationships with the idols and false gods are found throughout the land. In speaking of their unfaithfulness to the Lord in terms of sexual faithfulness of her wife to her husband, the Lord underlines some of the betrayal that is involved. While relationships with idols can be more transactional in character, the Lord desires the exclusive and wholehearted loyalty of his people.

He wants them to be unreservedly devoted to him and to love him fully. Yet the entirety of the land that he lovingly gave to his people is polluted with their infidelity. Every green and fruitful tree has been set apart for fertility worship.

The blood of the children that he blessed them with is shed in the valleys as the children

are sacrificed to Moloch. Gary Smith suggests that we read the opening clause of verse 6 as, Among the dead the valley is your portion. They had there sacrificed to demonic deities, giving their very offspring as tribute.

In verse 7 we move from the valleys to the high mountains where they had also committed their idolatry, continuing to describe this in the language of marital infidelity. In verse 8 the people are described as having uncovered their bed, loved the beds of their lovers, and looked upon nakedness. It is likely that this verse also talks about them having made a covenant with these false deities.

The door and the doorpost here most likely refer to temples, not just to their private dwellings. Verses 9 and 10 most likely extend the notion of infidelity to refer also to the ways that they sought alliances and aid from foreign rulers. This of course was a prominent theme within the first half of the Book of Isaiah, where Judah was tempted to look to Assyria during the Syro-Ephraimite war, and then to Egypt and Babylon during the later Assyrian crisis.

They had devoted great effort and invested great hopes within this pursuit. And the Lord asks what dread or fear, what reverence led them to do these things? Was he just silent for too long and they ignored him? However when the Lord speaks it will not be in their favour. He is going to declare their righteousness and their deeds, but that righteousness and their deeds will clearly be of no benefit for them because they are entirely hollow.

What are they going to do when crisis comes? They should go to their idols if they are really the object of their trust. Let them help them. All who do this however will be destroyed, but those who take refuge in the Lord will inherit the land itself.

In verse 14 there is a shift as we move to a statement of salvation. Back in chapter 40 verse 3 we read Verse 14 could be read in part as an allusion back to this, although it also looks forward to chapter 62 verse 10. Go through, go through the gates, prepare the way for the people, build up, build up the highway, clear it of stones, lift up a signal over the peoples.

As in chapter 62, but in contrast to chapter 40, the way being prepared here is for the people, not the Lord primarily. The people are being brought back into the blessing of the Lord's presence. The Lord is the one who speaks, is the one who is high and lifted up.

Once again, robust theological claims are those which drive the strength of the promises. Because the Lord is the God that He is, He can make the promises that He does. Our confidence ultimately rests in the fact that He is God.

There is a correspondence in the contrast between the high and holy place where the Lord dwells and the contrite and lowly spirit that He heeds. The Lord does not merely dwell in the highest heavens. He also dwells with Him with the lowliest spirit, promising

to revive the strength of all who are humble.

The Lord may discipline His wayward people, but never with the end of finally destroying them. He knows the weakness of man, and so He deals with man accordingly. Because of the iniquity and the injustice of His people, He was angry with them and judged them.

He hid His face from them, withholding His blessings. However, the people did not respond by turning back to Him. And so, as the people would not respond, the Lord had to heal His people.

One of the great promises of the New Covenant given in the Prophets is that the Lord will deal with the unfaithful hearts of His people, writing His law within them and giving them a new heart of flesh where they once had a heart of stone. The consequence of the Lord's healing of His people is praise upon their lips, peace, peace to the far and to the near. In contrast to these restored people, however, the wicked are like the restless tossing sea, ceaseless and peaceless tumult.

They cannot be quiet, and as a result, they will find no peace. A question to consider, why is it appropriate that the Lord dwells with Him who is of a contrite and lowly spirit? Azar chapter 58 describes the hollow worship of Israel in verses 1 to 5, contrasting that with true worship of the Lord in verses 6 to 14. This returns us to themes familiar from the beginning of the book in chapter 1 verses 11 to 17.

I cannot endure iniquity and solemn assembly. Your new moons and your appointed feasts my soul hates. They have become a burden to me.

I am weary of bearing them. When you spread out your hands I will hide my eyes from you. Even though you make many prayers I will not listen.

Your hands are full of blood. Wash yourselves. Make yourselves clean.

Remove the evil of your deeds from before my eyes. Cease to do evil. Learn to do good.

Seek justice. Correct oppression. Bring justice to the fatherless.

Plead the widow's cause. John Oswald sees a parallel between the structure of chapters 56 and 57 and chapters 58 and 59. The first eight verses of chapter 56 describe true religion.

Chapter 56 verse 9 to 57 verse 13 describe the failure of the leaders and the adultery of the people. And then the rest of chapter 57 spoke of the Lord's saving action. Within chapters 58 and 59, chapter 58 corresponds to chapter 56 verses 1 to 8. In the former section the inclusion of foreigners and eunuchs who observed the Lord's Sabbaths and kept his covenant was declared.

In chapter 58 it is fasting that is the central practice of religious devotion that is

discussed. But at the end of the chapter Sabbath is returned to. The prophet is instructed to lift up his voice to Jacob and declare their sins to them.

Yet reading the beginning of verse 2 we might wonder what their sin could be. They seem to seek the Lord diligently and daily and delight to know his ways. But their practice is fundamentally hypocritical.

They are as if they were a nation that did righteousness and did not forsake the judgment of their God. They are not in fact such a nation. They feign the appearance of such a nation.

They do the right rituals. They say the right words. But even though they supposedly delight to draw near to the Lord, their hearts are not near him at all.

The people wonder why the Lord does not respond to their acts of religious devotion. Surely in their careful observance of the rituals and the prayers that they have offered, they have given the Lord good reason to attend to them. Israel only really had one major fast every year on the Day of Atonement.

At various other times, however, there would be occasional fasts. Fasts that responded to a national crisis or were a form of public repentance and turning back to the Lord. The fast in view here, whether a particular fast that they had offered or a more general practice of fasting, is not accepted by the Lord because of their approach.