

potentially imminent. The bright glory of the King shines immediately behind the clouds of the Assyrian darkness even though actually dated for 'the latter time' (9:1:8:23); the Servant stands in close relation to the return from Babylon and the desolate Zion (48:22 – 49:1; 49:14; 54:1) even though the passages contain no hint of the time of his coming; and the Anointed Conqueror seems to stand ready at any time to intervene in vengeance and salvation. The people of God are ever in stress of one sort or another but ever buoyed up by the light that shines behind the clouds.

This seems to be what Isaiah meant his book to be to his immediate disciples and to the ongoing church. They on their part are the people of the word of God, called to patient obedience even though they fail, called to persist through opposition, threat and ceaseless odds. Guided by Isaiah, contemporaries looked forward to the exile, return and, at any moment beyond the exile, the medium-term and ultimate Messianism the prophet taught. Our position as still the people of the word of God and still taught by Isaiah is significantly different and significantly the same. In essence, Isaiah's book needs only simple adjustments to fit into our time-line. We stand precisely on 56:1, looking back to the work of the Servant (now fulfilled in the person, life, death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus) and looking forward to the coming of the Anointed Conqueror. The only difference is that while we know that the King already reigns, his kingship is incognito to the world at large, and we await his coming who is the King of Kings and Lord of Lords and who will reign on the Mount Zion of Hebrews 12:22 and before his elders gloriously (24:23).

4. *The text of Isaiah*

The Hebrew text of Isaiah (the MT) has come to us in a fine state of preservation. In his valuable commentary on Haggai, I. A. Verhoef remarks that fifteen years' experience in Bible translation work 'has strengthened the conviction that the majority of proposed alterations to the text ... are really unnecessary'.* He says this as a general observation on the MT as a whole; it is certainly applicable to Isaiah. Few and far between are the cases where there is any real doubt what the text is intended to mean or where emendation demands serious consideration. Of the external witnesses to the text of Isaiah, the *Targum of Isaiah*² (an early Aramaic paraphrase) would appear to witness to an underlying text close to if not identical with the MT. The bearing of the Septuagint (LXX)³ and Q^a is less easy to discern. Ottley ventured that LXX^B, while being the Greek MS to which preeminence is generally assigned, is nevertheless 'by common consent one of the worst translated parts of the LXX'.* This judgment, of course, assumes that the LXX translators were working from the MT and made a bad job of their task. This may be correct, for many of the LXX variants arise in places where the MT itself involves Hebrew unusual idiom or vocabulary and (though with temerity) one wonders if the translators were linguistically up to it. But the possibility is now more strongly ventilated that the LXX was following a Hebrew original differing from the MT.⁵ Even were

¹P. A. Verhoef, *The Books of Haggai and Malachi* (NIC, Eerdmans, 1987), p. 18.

²J. Stenning, *The Targum of Isaiah* (Clarendon Press, 1949).

³A. Rahlfs, *Septuaginta* (Stuttgart, 1935); Ottley, *Isaiah according to the Septuagint*.

⁴Ottley, pp. 8–9.

⁵Cf. Oswalt, p. 30. F. M. Cross and S. Talmon, *Qumran and the History of the Biblical Text* (Harvard University Press, 1975).

INTRODUCTION

that the case, however, the tasks of recovering the Hebrew original on the basis of the LXX would be very uncertain. Q^a is our oldest Hebrew manuscript, possibly dating from 100 BC and taking us back a thousand years behind the Ben Asher text of the MT (AD 1009). The overwhelming identity of this text with the MT indicates the reliance we can place on what we have inherited and the astonishing care and accuracy of the copyists. At the same time study of the variations in Q^a as compared with the MT suggests to experts that we have here representatives of two distinct families of manuscripts. The points where Q would appear to have a significant bearing on our understanding of Isaiah have been taken into account in the commentary.* The observable trend in specialist study of the Old Testament text is to move away from the passion for rewriting what has been inherited and to adopt a basically more reverent, though still alert, attitude to the text as given. A former generation of commentators called 'emendation' what was many times at best a display of linguistic cleverness and at worst the indulgence of an occupational hazard. 'Our mandate', Oswalt wisely says, 'is to interpret the text as it is before us unless there is manuscript evidence to correct that text. To do anything else is to build our interpretations upon air.'

¹BH footnotes the variants between Q^a and the MT. BHS offers a selection of those considered to be the more significant. Cf. W. J. Martin, *The Dead Sea Scroll of Isaiah*, The Campbell Morgan Memorial Lecture 1954 (The Bookroom, Westminster Chapel, 1954).

²Oswalt, p. 31.

Isaiah 1—37
The book of the King

1. Theme

A single theme binds the first thirty-seven chapters of Isaiah: the king who reigns in Zion. It is a complex theme, full of tensions. Sometimes the king is the Lord himself (6:1,5), sometimes he is the current king of the house of David (7:1-2) and sometimes he is the king who is yet to come (9:6-7). On the whole, however, the future dominates the present, yet even here the tension continues, for at one time the vision is of the Lord's coming reign (24:23) and at another it is of a king born in David's line (11:1,10). The resolution of these tensions animates the whole section and excites the reader with the breadth and glory of Isaiah's message.

a. Chapters 1-5

Isaiah often allows major themes to enter unobtrusively. The king theme illustrates this. In chapter 1 Isaiah seems absorbed in the current declension of Jerusalem (verses 21-23) and its inevitable punishment (verses 24-25) but, with that abruptness which so often marks his message of hope, he discerns also a coming restoration when all will be 'as in the days of old ... as at the beginning' (verse 26). Since this 'beginning' happened under David when he captured the fortress of Zion and made it the political and religious focus of his kingdom (2 Sa. 5), the Davidic glory is on its way back. In chapters 24 the glories of Zion as the international city, religiously and politically (2:2-4), are far removed from what the prophet sees (2:5-4:1). Present reality mocks expectation but, nevertheless, there is a coming glory, a creative act of the Lord (4:5) through which he will preside over a renewed Zion in the ancient glory of his fiery-cloudy presence among his people (*cf.* Ex. 13:21-22; 40:34-38).

b. Chapters 6-12

In these chapters the theme is defined more closely. In what turns out to be an apt symbol of David's house itself, King Uzziah is dying (6:1; *cf.* 2 Ki. 15:5; 2 Ch. 26:16-18). But alongside the dying, defiled king there is the Holy One, 'the King, the LORD Almighty [of hosts]' (6:5). The interplay of these two kingships – the holy, divine King and the terminally-ill Davidic house – and their envisaged merger in a divine King of David's line (7:14; 9:6-7; 11:1,10) becomes the unifying theme. Chapters 6 and 12 provide a framework with their common stress on the Holy One exalted in Zion (6:1, 3; 12:6) and, internally, two subsections climax with the vision of the King who is to come (9:1-7; 11:1-10). We are allowed to see the glory of his person, the perfection of his reign and the world-wide spread of his dominion (9:7; 11:10). This latter provides the link with the following chapters.

c. Chapters 13-27

This section is structured so as to reveal the people of God surrounded by the peoples of the world. To the outward eye they are as any other people, caught up in the historical changes and chances of earthly experience, involved too in failure and declension. There is, however, a story within the story: the Lord has not abandoned his David-centred plans. The dynasty will yet be productive (14:29) and the Zion-ideal achieved (14:32). The Zion that could even now spread its promises over the needy (15:1 – 16:14) will one day welcome in the

nations when the Lord comes to reign (24:23), sets his Messianic banquet before all (25:6-9) and receives outcasts to worship at his holy mountain (27:13).

d. Chapters 28-35

Presented as a series of solemn denunciations (28:1;29:1,15;30:1;31:1;33:1), this section recalls chapters 6-12 in its blend of current politics and visionary pictures. The time was one of challenge to the people of God, and their security of tenure was called into question. Notwithstanding that they failed under pressure, deserting the way of faith for that of political expediency, the Lord's promise does not fail: a king will reign (31:1), the object of his people's admiration (33:17). In the true Zion the Lord will be king (33:20-22), and his redeemed will enter the city with joy (35:9b-10).

e. Chapters 36-37

Finally, the rock of history is placed under the edifice of vision. Here was a specific occasion when the Davidic king and his city came under threat but the promises of the Lord, when put to the test, proved durable. The Lord stood by his king and city and did so for David's sake (37:35).

2. Structure

The unity of 'The book of the King' is, however, more than simply a unity of theme. There is also a united structure and a well-conceived integration of parts. We will discuss presently the reasons for considering chapters 1-5 as prefatory. For the moment we will set those chapters on one side and examine chapters 6-37. Within these chapters there are, as we have seen, four blocks of material: 6-12, 13-27, 28-35 and 36-37. These divisions are dictated by the text itself, as indeed is the separation off of chapters 1-5. Now, within this fourfold division, chapters 6-12 and 28-35 match each other. In them Isaiah grapples with two identical historical and spiritual crises. He addresses himself directly to current leaders and policies, matching them all the while with related predictions of glory to come; balancing the fickleness of humankind coming under condemnation with the steadfastness of God holding firmly to his promises. In each section, the more plainly Isaiah roots himself in the present the more confidently he discerns the future.

The remaining passages, though differing in content, fulfil the same function of confirming the vision that has preceded them. Thus, chapters 13-27 work out the promise of the world-wide Davidic ruler by putting the promise (e.g. of 9:7) into universal, even cosmic, and eschatological perspective. In other words, what Isaiah has promised he now confirms by showing that it is part of a coherent world-view. By comparison with the mind-stretching scope of this vision, chapters 36-37 are almost homely! The preceding chapters 28-35 are centred on a period when Judah was squeezed between the two would-be superpowers, Assyria and Egypt. Contrary to the received political wisdom, Isaiah saw the security of the Lord's people not in politics and armed alliances, but in confidence in the Lord's promises. It is the function of chapters 36-37 to prove the earthly (and earthy) realism of this position: See what happened when the Assyrian might moved against Jerusalem! The Lord needs no help from Egypt, nor is he perturbed by Assyria. He is truly Lord of the nations.

This view of chapters 6-37 yields the following integration:

THE BOOK OF THE KING

- a¹ In the days of Ahaz: the Syro-Ephraimite crisis. History-based oracles with visions of the Davidic future (chapters 6-12)
 - b¹ Confirmatory oracles: the Lord's, Davidic, Zion-centred world-purpose (chapters 13-27)
- a² In the days of Hezekiah: the Egyptian crisis. History-based oracles with visions of the Davidic future (chapters 28-35)
 - b² Confirmatory events: the Lord's demonstrated power to do what he will with world empires in the interests of David (chapters 36-37)

We can take one further step in exposing the careful schema of these chapters. Twice in chapters 13-27 Israel, Egypt and Assyria are associated. First, by the act of the Lord, world empires (typified in Assyria and Egypt) will be brought with his people to worship him (19:23–25), and secondly, from Egypt and Assyria the Lord will gather his dispersed people (27:12–13). Is this a credible vision or a fond imagining? The question is as important for us as for those who first heard the message from Isaiah. Is the Lord really sovereign on earth? Does he rule even the superpowers? Consequently, is faith a practical policy for life? Isaiah answers directly. In chapters 28-35, these three peoples – the Lord's people as represented by Judah and the Egyptian and Assyrian imperialists – confront each other, and the Lord's executive authority on each is made known. When the Lord intervenes it is no longer of significance whether Egyptian promises and Assyrian threats are real. The God of Israel is Lord indeed. This is the theological conviction of chapters 28-35 and the proved reality of chapters 36-37. With this in mind we can see the whole section as follows:

- a The theme is announced: the Lord's Zion-centred, world-wide Davidic purposes. The coming king and his rule (chapters 6-12)
- b The theme is confirmed (chapters 13-37)
 - b¹ First confirmation: the subservience of all nations, typically Assyria and Egypt, to the Lord's world-purpose (chapters 13-27)
 - b² Second confirmation: Assyria and Egypt in their contemporary reality subservient to the Lord's sway (chapters 28-35)
 - b³ Third confirmation: an illustrative proof of the actual subservience of Assyria and Egypt to the Lord. He is Lord of all (chapters 36-37)

A. The preface.

Judah: diagnosis and prognosis (1:1—5:30)

The fact that the call of Isaiah to be a prophet is not recorded until chapter 6 requires explanation. Are we to understand that chapters 1-5 report a pre-call ministry or that chapter 6 is a renewal of the call? The answer lies in the careful editing of the book. Chapter 6 is indeed Isaiah's call, but in order to depict the situation into which he was called he makes use of oracles originally preached after his call, constructing them here into an author's preface. His purpose is to present an 'anatomy' of Judah at the commencement of his prophetic ministry.

Chapters 1-5 differ from chapters 6-12 in the absence of any historical markers. With 6:1 we enter upon stated historical situations in which dates (6:1;7:1) and world powers (7:1, 17; 8:4) are mentioned but, apart from the title (1:1), the first five chapters have no dates and no names except those of Israel and Judah. This detachment of these oracles from the situations which first called them forth is deliberate. We have here a balanced presentation of truths about Judah whereby we enter with Isaiah into the initial circumstances of his ministry and share his fears and hopes. Like every author's preface these chapters are the 'backdrop' to the whole book.

Within chapters 1-5, chapters 24 make a subsection bracketed off by the two Zion poems of 2:2-4 and 4:2-6. On each side of this, chapters 1 and 5 both have coherent structures, giving a threefold division of the whole. The three divisions have the common theme of God's people in rebellion against him, but each section sets this rebellion in a different context. Chapter 1 reviews three facets of the contemporary scene: national calamity (verses 6-8), religious declension (verses 10-15) and social collapse (verses 21-23) arising from rebellion (verse 2), misdemeanour (verse 15) and infidelity (verse 21). Chapters 24 offer another view of Zion: the coming day when the city will be a place of international pilgrimage (2:2), the locus of the Lord's law (2:3) and the source of world-wide righting of wrongs and of peace (2:4). Against this the actuality of contemporary Jerusalem makes a frightful contrast, with its national (2:5-16), religious (2:17-22) and social (3:1 - 4:1) disintegration. Chapter 5 has another way of presenting the theme: the Lord's choice vine has become a degenerate plant (verses 1-7) bearing a foul crop, depicted in six 'woes' (verses 8, 11, 18, 20-22). The following analysis thus arises:

- 1:1-31 Sin and experience
Defection from the Lord nationally, religiously and socially resulted
in devastation
- 2:1-4:6 Sin and election
As inheritors of the Abrahamic promise, the Lord's people were

called to be a blessing to the whole earth but they chose rather the way of rebellion
 5:1–30 Sin and grace
 The Lord lavished his care on his people to the point where he could ask ‘What more?’ (5:4). They, however, degenerated into sin and produced a harvest of unrighteousness

These three sections have in common a contrast between the ideal and the actual. The Lord intended his people to live as his children (1:2), to be the city-community of world-wide blessing (2:2–4) and to produce the fruit of righteousness (5:1–7). The actuality proved to be very different, and we have to ask how will the Lord react as his ideal is corrupted? In 1:24–31 and 3:13–4:6 the divine reaction of wrath and punishment fills the foreground, but the background is full of the light of hope (cf. 1:24 with verses 25–26 and 3:13–4:1 with 4:2). Chapter 5, however, is very different. We must be careful here to enter into what Isaiah thus sensed about his nation as he launched on his ministry. Certainly, rebellion brings disaster as its reward but yet it does not exhaust the Lord’s capacity to redeem and restore (1:26–27). Likewise, Israel’s failure to magnetize the nations into Zion (2:2ff.) is lamentable and culpable but is, nevertheless, nothing that cannot be cleansed away (4:4). The Lord will create a new city and a new people fit for him to dwell among (4:3–6). But when the Lord has to say, ‘What more could he been done for my vineyard than I have done for it?’ (5:4) the situation is different indeed! The absence of the note of hope in chapter 5 compels the question whether sin has nullified grace. In this way chapters 5 is climactic. The sword (1:20) can yet be averted by returning to obedience. In 3:25–26 the situation is more desperate: enemy assault is inescapable, bringing dreadful casualties (4:1); but now the enemy is at the gates and darkness and distress are closing in on the land (5:24–30).

Is darkness, then, to have the last word? Is sin finally to issue in death? And if it does, what has become of all the promises of God? It is with these questions that Isaiah sets the scene for the ministry to which he was called.

1. The title (1:1)

For the histories of the four kings under whom Isaiah prophesied, see pp. 18ff. All thirty-five occurrences of *vision* (*hāzôn*) and thirty-six out of forty-eight of *saw* (*hāzā*) refer to truth disclosed by God; not necessarily in visual experience (e.g. Dn. 8:2) but by supernatural revelation (cf. 1 Sa. 3:1; Ps. 89:19; Is. 30:10). The title suitably covers all sixty-six chapters of Isaiah. Throughout the book the people of God and their city constitute Isaiah’s ‘story-line’ and it is consonant with his mind that he should have devised this initial description of his work.¹ Arguments advanced against this view are not persuasive. It is urged, for example, that Isaiah always speaks of ‘Jerusalem and Judah’ (e.g. 3:1) whereas the title reverses the order. But it is natural that ministering in Jerusalem as he was he would first address the immediate audience before widening his

¹ To suggest that the title refers only to chapters 1-12 as a sort of interim Isaianic collection is unsatisfactory. While chapters 1-12 are obviously concerned with ‘Judah and Jerusalem’ so are 28-40. But in fact ‘Jerusalem’ and ‘Zion’ occur ninety-seven times in the sixty-six chapters and are quite evenly spread. Jerusalem-based prophets have significantly more references to the city than others, e.g. Micah has seventeen compared with four in Amos. Isaiah 40 - 55 has proportionately almost twice as many as Ezekiel.

reference, whereas in naming kings their country naturally takes precedence over their city (*cf.* 36:7).

2. Sin and experience (1:2-31)

Having introduced himself as a man whose message (*hāzôn*) and whose ability to perceive its truth (*hāzâ*) are both from God, Isaiah turns to expose the inner quality of the period whose outward shape he summarized in the names of its kings.

The oracles recorded here are undated and no advantage arises from devising hypotheses regarding their point of origin in Isaiah's ministry. Their significance does not arise from their historical setting but from their searching exposure of sin and its consequences in the people of God. They touch in turn the national, religious and social facets of contemporary life.

a. *The national situation (1:2-9)*

Isaiah begins his 'anatomy' of Judah with what is plain for all to see – the broken state of the nation (5-8). He does so by means of a courtroom drama:

A¹ Summons (2a)

The court convened. The dignity of the Lord whose voice commands **all** creation

B Arraignment (2b-8)

B¹ The charge levelled: rebellion against the Lord. Sin contrary to nature (2b-3)

B² Guilt exposed. Abandonment of the Lord. Sin contrary to privilege (4)

B³ Experience ignored. Rebellion against divine discipline. Sin contrary to reason, productive of disaster (5-8)

A² Comment

The situation reviewed. The faithfulness of the Lord, preserving a remnant (9)

Isaiah teaches a theological and covenant view of national history: the relation between spirituality (obedience to God as the governing factor in the nation's life) and national prosperity and security. This is classically expounded in Deuteronomy 28 – 29 as the foundation of life under the covenant. This view of life must not be understood as limiting God to our notion of what constitutes a suitable *quid pro quo*. Frequently life looks as if no link existed between morality and prosperity (*cf.* Ps. 44:13-17). Here a simplistic view of retribution is countered in a different direction, where divine mercy has inhibited due reward. Yet all such seeming 'deviations' belong on the divine side (9). On the human side the position of faith is paramount, that righteousness is the clue to a secure and prospering life (*cf.* Ps. 1).

2 In the Old Testament the *heavens* and *earth* are frequently summoned (*i*) as witness to an oath (e.g. Dt. 4:26); (*ii*) as witness for the prosecution when the Lord charges his people (e.g. Ps. 50:4ff.); (*iii*) to rejoice when the Lord's greatness is declared (e.g. as king, 1 Ch. 16:31; as Saviour, Ps. 69:34-35); (*iv*) to express abhorrence of Israel's sin (e.g. Je. 2:12). Thus the created universe is always on the side of the Creator (e.g. 45:8; Je. 4:23ff.), reflecting the

relationship which exists between God and man – whether the thorns and thistles of Genesis 3:18 or the Messianic abundance of Amos 9:13. Here the heavens and earth are called in to underline the dignity of the voice which commands the attention of all creation, *For the LORD has spoken/For it is the Lord himself who has spoken*. Thus Isaiah understands the significance of his *vision* (1): human though he is, he communicates what the Lord has spoken.

The nub of the Lord's charge is brought out by the emphasis in *I reared children/Sons I have reared*. Exodus 4:22 reveals **sonship** as a redemption concept. Unlike contemporary pagans, who considered themselves children of their god by some quasi-physical act of begetting, Israel was the Lord's son by historical divine choice and by the exodus as a work of redemption. Redemption initiated a process of divine providential care. The picture of the attentive parent and the growing child covers the whole historical period from Exodus to Isaiah. The grace which saved and the love which cared were alike rebuffed when *they .. rebelled*. 'They' is emphatic – 'they of all people!', the heirs of redemption, the recipients of parental care. In the vocabulary of rebellion, this verb (*p&a*'), and its noun (*peša'*), express wilful flouting of authority (*cf.* in secular use 1 Ki. 12:19).

3 Isaiah uses rich illustrations and, as here, often explains the allusion (e.g. 8:7). The Lord's dealings with his people are designed to develop true spiritual instincts, a mind-set of attachment to the Lord as automatic and spontaneous as that seen in the animal creation. The nouns *Israel* and *my people* are emphasized, matching the 'they of all people' of verse 2. *Israel* is the man whom the Lord made new (Gn. 32:27-28), and *my people* indicates exclusive election (Ex. 6:6-7) with its consequent expectation of distinctive life (Ex. 19:4-6).

Know (*vyāda'*) frequently runs beyond head-knowledge to include personal relationships (Gn. 4:1; *niv* 'lay with') and carries the implication of a different life-style (1 Sa. 2:12). *Understand* (*vbin*) means 'to see to the heart of a matter or discern'.

4 The charge (2b-3) continues as four nouns describe privilege and four adjectives describe how it was corrupted. The *nation*, intended to be distinct in holiness (Ex. 19:6), became (lit.) the 'sinning nation' (participle from *vḥātā'*, 'to miss the target'; Jdg. 20:16); the *people*, redeemed and unique (Dt. 4:4-6; 2 Sa. 7:23-24), became 'heavy with iniquity', as if the Lord who carried them (46:3-4; Ex. 19:4) himself felt the burden. '*aôn* (*guilt/iniquity*') is sin as corruption of character and nature rather than an element in behaviour. **Brood/seed** is the word for Abrahamic descent (41:8) but is traced here to a line of *evildoers*. *Children/sons* (*cf.* verse 2b) indicates the relationship of the redeemed to God (Ex. 4:22) which was meant to issue in a distinctive life (Dt. 14:1-2) but is now manifested in *corruption* (*všāhat*, 'to spoil or ruin'). They were designed to be special as the unique *nation* and *people*, special to God as the 'seed' of Abraham and his very own 'sons' – and sin had ruined ail! But the heart of this sinfulness is how they now stand in relation to the Lord. Only commitment to the Lord secures true values in life; when the commitment goes, values follow. To forsake the Lord is the opposite of to seek the Lord. Just as 'seeking' is not looking for him as though he were lost but showing a determination to be with him where he is to be found, so forsaking is deliberately distancing ourselves from him. It arises from a change of heart whereby he who should be loved is rather **spurned/treated** with scorn' (*vna'as*, *cf.* Nu. 14:11,23). *The Holy One of Israel* (see pp. 17f.) may well have been coined by Isaiah as a title for the Lord to express the revelation granted to him in his inaugural vision (see on 6:3).

Holiness is the heart of the nature of God. Thus, in the full reality of all that makes him divine and marks him out as unique he had drawn near to and in a real sense become the possession of Israel, he was 'Israel's Holy One'. This was the one they had treated with scorn. In doing so they had, by implication, *turned their backs on him*' turned themselves back into strangers' (lit. 'have be-stranged themselves backward!'). *ṽzūr* is 'to turn aside' (intransitive). The form here (**niphal**) is reflexive with the meaning suggested by the participle (**zār**) used throughout the Old Testament for 'alien, foreigner, non-Israelite' (see verse 7). God's chosen people have 'reverted to alien status'.

5–8 The folly of inviting further chastisement (5a) is underlined by a metaphor of sickness in the 'body politic' (6). The reality is described in verse 7 and the result by the similes of verse 8. Isaiah does not think it necessary to tell us who were the historical agents of this divine punishment, saving that they were *foreigners* (7). The choice probably lies between the Syro-Ephraimite incursions about 735 (2 Ki. 15:37–16:6; 2 Ch. 28:1–8. See p. 19 and on 7:1-2) or Sennacherib's invasions in 701 (Is. 36–37; 2 Ch. 32). It is not important to decide. Whatever its historical reference, the function of the allusion is to display the ill-deserts of forsaking the Lord.

5 The form of the question requires it to be translated, 'Why, seeing that you will be beaten again, do you rebel again?' Sin is not only unreasonable (2b) but also unreasoning, unable to draw proper conclusions and make appropriate responses. It is blindness to what God is doing (cf. 5:19). *sārā* (*rebellion*) emphasizes stubbornness rather than **wilfulness** (cf. verse 2; see Ho. 4:16).

6-7 None of the kings under whom Isaiah ministered were fools politically, economically or militarily. It is not, however, these factors which make for national well-being or security. For all their worldly wisdom, the country sickened unto death under them. The metaphors of the wounded man untended (6) and the land without **defence** (7) alike speak of the helplessness and hopelessness which forsaking the Lord brings.'

8 *Shelter*/'booth' (*sukkā*; cf. Lv. 23:39–43) and *hut*/'lodge' (*ṽlīn*, 'to stay overnight, be a temporary guest') point to the flimsy and transient, but matching this internal weakness there is enemy vigilance. The *city under siege* will not escape through any failure of human hostility.

9 Into this situation where forsaking the Lord has brought the nation to the end of its tether, internally (6) and externally (7–8), comes the unmerited factor of divine preservation. There is a point at which the Lord sets his fence around his people and says 'No' to the consequences of sin and the power of the foe. Merit may call for an overthrow *like Sodom* (Gn. 19) but mercy determines on survival. The **LORD Almighty** represents two nouns in apposition, (lit.) 'The **LORD** [who is] hosts'. In other words, to think of the Lord is to think of power and resource unbounded ('hosts' being a 'plural of diversity'

The alteration of *overthrown by strangers* to 'Sodom in its overthrow' (see NEB, BHS, etc.) is unwarranted. The verb 'to overthrow' (*ṽhāpāk*) and its noun (*mahpākā*) are used typically of Sodom but this does not justify change. The sentence is a perfect Isaianic palistrophe: the first and sixth words are identical ('foreigners'), the second and fifth are words of destruction ('devour', 'overthrown') and the third ('it') and fourth ('desolate') refer to the land.

²*Under siege* represents *n'sūrā*. *ṽsūr* means 'to besiege' but its passive (niph) participle is not found elsewhere and would ordinarily be *n'sōrā*, which is adopted by BHS. *ṽnāsar* ('to preserve') yields an active participle (qal) in the meaning 'blockaders' (Je. 4:16), and our word here could be the qal passive participle 'blockaded'.

ISAIAH 1:10-20

and indicating 'every sort of'.* Isaiah began his first discourse by emphasizing *The LORD* as the sovereign speaker (2); he rounds it off with an *inclusio*, an identical emphasis on the Lord as sovereign in mercy. Judge and Saviour are one.

b. The religious situation (1:10-20)

In this passage the opening *Hear the word of the LORD* is balanced by the concluding *For the mouth of the LORD has spoken, and says the LORD* (11) is matched by the same words in verse 18. In between there are two sections each with three main thrusts (12-15 and 16-17), and the topics in the opening and closing sections are arranged chiasmally.

- A¹ The first summons: The Lord's displeasure (10-11)
 - a* The flouting of the law (10)
 - a² Ineffective religion (11)
 - B What the Lord has not asked: useless religion (12-15)
 - b¹ No divine authorization (12)
 - b² No divine acceptance (13-14)
 - b³ No divine response (15)
 - C What the Lord requires (16-17):
 - c¹ Towards God – cleansing (16abc)
 - c² In personal life-reformation (16d-17b)
 - c³ In society – concern (17c-e)
- A² The second summons: The Lord's invitation (18-20)
 - a² Effective cleansing (18)
 - a¹ Return to obedience (19-20)

Every religion has its necessary outward forms, and every religion is susceptible to the same danger of defining the reality in terms of the form. Hebrew religion was no different, saving that the expenditure of time (*New Moons, Sabbaths, festivals, pilgrimages to Zion etc.*) and money (*bulls, lambs, goats etc.*) which their religion required may have made them proportionately the more affronted that such exercises meant nothing to the God whom they thus thought to honour. Was Isaiah, then, renouncing the tradition in which he had been reared, which held that all these religious practices were commands of the Lord? Was he advocating 'morality without religion'? No, but he was issuing a call to return to the primitive integration of the **two** elements of ethics and rite. In the Mosaic deposit, redemption (Ex. 12), the giving of the law (Ex. 20) and the institution of religious observance (Ex. 25:1 – Lv. 27:34) followed each other in that order. The law was given so that those who were already the Lord's people by redemption might know how to behave in ways acceptable to him who had redeemed them. The **cultus** was given so that those who were committed to the life of obedience might remain in the Lord's presence notwithstanding their failures and have recourse to mercy and forgiveness for their lapses from obedience. Outside the context of the law of obedience the

*See Wade *ad loc.* 'Yahweh of hosts ... the supra-mundane resources of the Lord .. power irresistible'. Cf. G. A. F. Knight, *A Biblical Approach to the Doctrine of the Trinity* (Oliver and Boyd, 1953), p. 21.

law of sacrifice had no utility.' This remains the abiding message of the passage.

10 *Hear and listen* are the same verbs as in verse 2. The identical divine voice, speaking through the prophet, now summons people, not the heavens. *Sodom* and *Gomorrah* forms a link with verse 9 which is intentional. It binds the two discourses together. This is what properly follows. The forsaking of the Lord which produced national disaster is to be traced out further. It also magnifies God's mercy which **forebore** to destroy his people altogether; but for that mercy they would have been *like Sodom* and *Gomorrah* (9). Here Isaiah says they are more than 'like', both *rulers* and *people*, are *Sodom* and *Gomorrah*. *Sodom* (see 3:9) is used as a symbol of sin paraded, sin as an accepted life-style. *tôrâ* (*law*) is 'teaching'. Although it is an authority-word (cf. Dt. 31:9–13), its context is the loving, family relationship in which parent 'instructs' child in life-values (cf. Pr. 6:20–35). The reference to *our God* brings out this element of tender concern, while at the same time suggesting that maybe he is not quite 'theirs' in the way they may think.

11 This verse makes three assertions: for all their plenitude, these sacrifices mean nothing to the Lord (what *are they to me?*); add nothing (I *have more than enough*) and do nothing (I *have no pleasure in the blood*). *Blood* was the core effectiveness of the sacrificial system (see e.g. Lv. 17:11) but here it failed to touch the heart of God. *Says the LORD* is in the imperfect tense and has the sense of 'keeps saying'. It is a matter so important to the Lord that he would drive it home by reiteration. *Fattened animals* were those reared specially for sacrifice and were the most expensive of beasts. The verb *hāpēs* (I *have no pleasure*) occurs in 53:10 (NIV 'it was the LORD's will'). Before Isaiah is finished he will have revealed a sacrifice in which the Lord does delight. But how can the Lord so persistently reject their sacrifices? Verses 12–15 supply the answer.

12 If Isaiah were denying that the sacrifices as such lacked divine authorization he would not here describe the temple *as my courts*. The Lord claims the house of sacrifice as his while at the same time rejecting the current sacrifices as something for which he never *asked/ 'sought'*. The divine purpose in the sacrificial system is for his people to *appear before me* (מַר לֵרָא'וֹת פָּנָי; cf. Ex. 23:17; 34:23) or, with altered vowels, 'to see my face' (לִיר'וֹת פָּנָי; cf. the same alternatives in Ex. 23:15; 34:20; Dt. 16:16; 31:11). Both ideas are biblical and express the wonder of worship. All had, however, been reduced to a *trampling of my courts*, which may be a reference to the abundant animals brought for sacrifice or to the mere physical attendance of those who brought them. This was all there was to it – the noise of feet on a pavement. A religion of rite and formalism has no divine authorization.

13 It is strong language to describe their temple worship as *meaningless, detestable* and unbearable! The accusation is not now of formalism (as in verse 12) but of religious commitment devoid of ethical resolve. *Your evil assemblies* is lit. 'iniquity and obligatory assembly'. In Skinner's memorable description it is the 'unholy alliance' of religious duty and personal iniquity. Cf. Jeremiah's accusation that they had made the Lord's house a robbers' den (Je. 7:11) – a

¹See further H. H. Rowley, *The Unity of the Bible* (Carey Kingsgate, 1953), pp. 30ff.; J. Lidblom, *Prophecy in Ancient Israel* (Blackwell, 1963), pp. 351ff.; J. A. Motyer, 'Prophecy' and 'Prophets', *IBD*.

²The expression here with the imperfect ('The Lord keeps saying'), as distinct from the formula 'Thus says the Lord' using the perfect tense of the verb, is virtually peculiar to Isaiah (1:11, 18; 33:10; 40:1, 25; 41:21; 66:9). Outside Isaiah it occurs only at Ps. 12:6 (cf. Driver, 33(a), Obs.).

place to which they went as robbers and from which they came as robbers, a place of security without a moral intention to reform. *Meaningless offerings* is 'a gift of nothing'. The inclusion of the Sabbath shows that Isaiah is condemning not the thing itself – how could he dismiss the Sabbath as lacking divine authority? – but its misuse (see his own commentary in chapter 58). *Assemblies* is from a root meaning 'to restrain' and hence contains the idea of an imposed obligation.

14 *My soul hates* is equivalent to 'I hate with all my heart'. *Become* implies that once the festivals were no burden and is a further indication that Isaiah is challenging current abuse not the validity of the sacrificial system as such. Hence he decries your festivals – the festivals as you **practise** them. They had replaced the principle of conformity to the **will** of God with the principle of **practising** what was acceptable and helpful to themselves (*cf.* Am. 4:4–5).

15 The topic is now intercession. This too means that Isaiah is criticizing not use but abuse for he would not denounce prayer as such. *Hide my eyes* denotes the opposite of the Lord letting his face shine on them (Nu. 6:25; Ps. 4:6-7), *i.e.* the withdrawal of divine favour from the person interceding. Prayer itself has become unavailing. Thus both intercessor and intercession are invalidated because *your hands are full of blood/'bloods'*, *i.e.* deeds of blood-guiltiness. In Hebrew idiom to 'consecrate' people to the Lord is 'to fill their hands' (Ex. 28:41) and 'to be consecrated' is 'to have one's hands full' (Jos. 14:8); it is expressive of total preoccupation with the Lord. The hands lifted up in prayer expressed different preoccupations.

16a-c Positive remedial action is now commanded beginning with a threefold command to get right with God. *Wash (Vrāhas)* appears seventy-three times in the Old Testament, of which fifty-two refer to ceremonial cleansing (e.g. Lv. 15:5–28). If Isaiah had intended the outright rejection of the cult he would have avoided this verb. *Make yourselves clean* is from either *Vzākā* (*cf.* Jb. 15:14; Ps. 74:13) or *Vzākak* (*cf.* Job. 15:15; La. 4:7). The meaning is the same: **purity** before God. In Isaiah's Hebrew *wash* and *make ... clean* are side by side without a connecting particle. This means that the second phrase expresses the leading idea and the first qualifies it, hence 'make yourselves clean before the Lord by the cleansing ordinances he has provided'. *Take .. out of my sight* indicates that the Lord's appointed means of cleansing can be guaranteed to remove every uncleanness which he would otherwise see. *Your evil deeds* is 'the evil of your doings'. The 'doings' themselves are past but their evil remains until removed by cleansing.

16d–17b The Lord gives three commands for the reordering of personal life. They are – decisive abandonment of the old life (*stop*), development of a new mind (*learn*) and setting new objectives and priorities (*seek*) conformed to the Lord's stated will. The underlying verb of *justice (mišpāt)* is *Všāpāt* meaning 'to judge, come to a decision, determine authoritatively what is right'. *mišpāt* is often therefore used, as here, to express the sum total of what the Lord has adjudged to be right, in a word, the will of God (*cf.* Rom. 12:2).

17c-e The final triad of commands covers the reformation of society, beginning with (lit.) 'put right the oppressor'. It is easy to alter *hāmōš* ('oppressor') to *hāmūš* ('oppressed') as the **MT** does but to do so destroys the contrast the three commands embrace. This is the contrast between the two ends of imperfect society, the oppressor and the needy, the one inflicting and the other suffering the hurt. Isaiah looks for a transformed society wherever it needs transforming.

18 *Reason together* is from *Vyākāh*, which does sometimes have the legal

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overtones of a court decision (*cf.* 2:4;11:4; Gn. 31:37). The parallelism between verses 2 and 10 may suggest that Isaiah is still thinking in forensic terms. How significant, then, that when the people are here called to the bar to hear the verdict it is expressed as an offer of free pardon and the chance of a new life! Isaiah will often later insist that the Lord's forgiveness accords with legal requirement (see e.g. on 49:24–26). For the tense of *says see* on verse 11. The emphasis in verse 11 that the ritual of sacrifice is unavailing is matched by the emphasis here on free pardon. *Scarlet* and *red* are the **colours** of blood-guilt (*cf.* verse 15). The Lord applies the remedy where he discerns the need. The structure of the context requires us to take *they shall be as white as snow* as a promise not as an ironic **question**.¹

- A' The command to enjoy cleansing (16a-c)
- B¹ The command to enter new life (16d–17)
- A² The invitation to enjoy cleansing (18)
- B² The alternatives of death or life (19–20)

To deny verse 18 as a genuine promise is to deny verse 16 as a realistic command. *Snow* and *wool* exemplify what is naturally white. The Lord's promise is not only to deal with the stain of sin but with the nature from which it springs.

19-20 *Willing, obedient, resist* and *rebel* require a response of will and deed. Obedience is not salvation by works. The first obedience is to the command to *wash* (16) and to *come* (18), and only thereafter are they to obey in a life conformed to the law of God. *For the mouth of the LORD has spoken* is a direct attribution of Isaiah's word to the Lord himself (*cf.* verses 2, 10).² Inspiration covered both what the prophet said and how he worded it. The Lord's judgments are to be executed by *the sword, i.e.* an invading enemy (*cf.* verse 7; 5:25–30).

c. *The social situation (1:21–26)*

In content this section is a lament over the collapse of Jerusalemite society; in form it is a superbly constructed palistrophic poem.

- A¹ The collapse of the faithful city (21a)
- B¹ Past and present contrasted: justice replaced by murder (21b)
- C¹ Metaphor: values turned to dross (22)
- D¹ The corrupt rulers (23)
- D² The divine Sovereign (24)
- C² Metaphor: dross purged (25)
- B² Past and future identified: justice restored in true judges (26a)
- A² The restoration of the faithful city (26b)

'The theme', comments Kidner, 'is vanished glory; even the metaphors for it tail off from the tragic to the trivial (wife ... silver ... wine). Only the moral loss is lamented: not David's empire or Solomon's wealth, simply their **justice**.'³ Alongside this theme, however, larger issues are afoot. In the first part

¹For the alternative views see Scott and Kaiser.

²The precise expression *For the mouth of the LORD has spoken* (*kī pi yahweh dibbēr*) occurs elsewhere only at 40:5; 58:14; Mi. 4:4; *cf.* e.g. 21:17; 22:25; 25:8; Ob. 18.

³D. Kidner, *NBC*, p. 592.