

INTRODUCTION

Beauty and truth

The experience of beauty and the many ways in which we give expression to it arise from defined, delineated and limited experiences. That moment on a bridge crossing the Nattai river. The people there with me. Everything grey in the fading light of dusk. The sudden rush of ducks disturbing the silence as they splash their wings against the water and head off into the gathering night. The cold with the anticipation of a fire and a pleasant night spent with friends. All this and much more makes that moment a treasured memory that sets it apart from other experiences which have since faded and are lost. Nothing abstract and generalised here. Every element precise, and beautiful.

An early morning in Port Moresby after an evening when the full moon had cast its spell over our companionship. A pure white flower had emerged overnight from a place where I would have least expected to see it – a cactus! The surprise, the contrast, the sheer beauty, has left a memory that will not fade – though the flower itself lasted only for a day. Nothing abstract and generalised here. Every element precise, and beautiful. It is always so. It is our limitations that make us special, that set us apart, and it is precisely in our limitations that beauty lies and is revealed.

It is the same with truth. There is a place for abstraction, for general principles, for learning wisdom that can guide one's life. But every time we have an insight into the way things really are (as distinct from the way we are in the habit of thinking about things, or the way we would like things to be) it is by way of insight into a precise, delineated and necessarily limited experience. We gain insight into truth not in spite of our limitations, but in and through them. This is the way things are in the real world.

This is the way things were for those who composed the Bible. There is a danger that we could be so fascinated by the notion that what we are reading is inspired by God that we might imagine that the precise, delineated and defined parameters of ordinary human experience are not factors to be considered when reading this sacred text. There is a danger that we could think of the Bible as being dictated by God in such a way that the human limitations of the inspired writers and of the circumstances in which they wrote have no relevance to what we find in the text. We could read the Bible texts as though they came straight from God and share in God's transcendent truth, somehow unrelated to history or to human experience. We could read them as if they expressed some abstract and eternal truth that is equally relevant in every age and to every person, because it comes from God who is unchanging Truth, and whose words, therefore, transcend the limitations of time, place and language.

The Bible is not like that. It is a record of limited human insights inspired by God that real people have expressed to other real people in limited human words and in specific cultural and historical circumstances. There is beauty and truth in the Bible texts. To find them (as distinct from imposing on the text our own preconceived notions) we will need to explore the historically conditioned and necessarily limited human experiences that gave rise to their inspired insights. The aim of this Introductory Commentary is to discover and express what it was that Isaiah and those whose insights are found in the Isaiah scroll intended to say by their words, what their contemporaries understood from these writings, why people found these writings inspiring, and why they cherished them, preserved them, copied them and handed them on.

The Older Testament is the fruit of centuries of reflection by people who were convinced that their God, YHWH*, the lord of creation and the lord of history, had chosen them in love and had a special mission for them in the world. They believed that there was a special providence guiding their history. They kept reflecting on it to remember God's love and covenant with them, and to discern God's will, as well as to learn from their mistakes, and so become more sensitive, attentive and faithful. They cherished their traditions, including the reflections of those who went before them, but they knew that no words, however sacred, can comprehend the mystery that is God, and so they kept questioning, refining and adapting earlier insights in the light of newer revelation.

Since they believed that it was God himself who was communicating with his people through the events of their history, the authors readily prefaced their inspired insights with expressions such as 'YHWH said' – a way of stating that the words that followed expressed God's will as best they were able to discern it. They expected that God's will would be beyond their ability to comprehend fully, and so they approached the inspired texts expecting that there would be many hidden meanings to be discovered there. They liked quoting Jeremiah who said: 'Is not my word like fire, says YHWH, and like a hammer which breaks the rock in pieces?'(23:29). They liked to break open the word to see the sparks of light that issued from it, revealing the divine enlightenment hidden within. The more meanings they were able to discover, the better. They delighted in playing with the text as one might play with a prism, enjoying the hundred and one reflections and flashes of colour that delight the eye and enlighten the heart. The texts expressed inspired insights into the presence and action of a living God in their history. No text could hold it all, and so the history of the development of the Older Testament is a history of prayerful debate, discussion and refinement, always in the light of historical experience.

This continued into the Newer Testament. Jesus' disciples reflected on the sacred texts in the light of the new revelation that they experienced in Jesus of Nazareth. They came to what they believed was a deeper understanding of God's intention in inspiring the scriptures – an understanding that was hidden prior to God's revelation in Jesus. When Paul, for example, comes to quote from the scriptures, he does so with joy and with profound respect and gratitude for the word of God expressed there. But he reads with eyes enlightened by the love of the one whom he describes as 'loving me and giving himself for me'(Galatians 2:20). He came to see that the love of God revealed in the heart of Jesus embraces every person, for it is the love of God. Furthermore, he recognised this as the mission confided by God to Abraham and to Israel and he did his best to carry out that mission as a faithful Jew. He carried on the tradition of the inspired authors who went before him in recognising the limits of earlier insights and earlier expressions, limits that were brought to light by the presence and action of God in history.

Paul often quotes or alludes to the Isaiah scroll, but his method of interpreting the sacred texts is different from the way modern scholarship approaches them, and from the method that this commentary will follow.

*spelt thus throughout to highlight the fact that it is a proper name, and in deference to Jewish practice of not pronouncing the divine name or writing it in its pronounceable form. When they read YHWH, they bow their head and say the word 'donāy ('Lord').

Paul's method of interpretation

We attempt to understand the meaning intended by the human author and understood by those for whom the text was written. This requires an attempt to understand the historical context within which the inspired authors were speaking/writing and the kind of questions they were attempting to address. Paul was following a long tradition of Jewish practice in trying to see how God's self-revelation in the sacred texts was to be interpreted in the light of new experiences – in Paul's case, the experience of the revelation of God in the person and teaching of Jesus. Paul did not attempt to discover what was in the mind of the inspired human authors or in the minds of those who first listened to these sacred texts. Paul's focus remains on Jesus, and this enables him to discover what he has come to understand as God's intention in revealing the scriptures – meanings that were hidden prior to God's revelation in Jesus. This poring over the scriptures in the light of historical experience is not new in Judaism. The Bible itself is the product of just such a process.

The value of Paul's inspired interpretation is obvious, but it does not tell us what was in the mind and heart of the authors of the sacred text or of those who welcomed, treasured and handed on these ancient writings. Modern scholarship is committed to using the tools available to attempt to discover the meaning the texts had for their authors. Such an attempt takes nothing from what Paul and his approach has to offer. It may add to it, by discovering the limited but truthful insights of the inspired authors.

This is not the place to examine the history of the ways in which the Scriptures have been interpreted by Christian commentators in the early, medieval and pre-modern Church, but a short examination of the approach of the first great Christian exegete, Origen (185-232), may help define what is different in the way modern scholarship approaches the sacred text. Origen saw himself as developing the methods used by Paul, and, though others disagreed with his methods, his influence on subsequent Christian interpretation was immense.

Origen often quotes statements of Paul: that what is written is written 'for us' (1Corinthians 10:6,11); that 'the letter kills, it is the Spirit that gives life' (2Corinthians 3:6); that the Law has value but only when it is read 'spiritually' (Romans 7:14). He refers, too, to the following from the Letter to the Hebrews: 'the law has only a shadow of the good things to come, and not the true form of these realities' (Hebrews 10:1). All scripture, in Origen's view, has a spiritual (by which he generally means 'allegorical') sense. The literal sense is to be followed, but not when the literal meaning is 'illogical', 'impossible' or 'unworthy of God'. In such cases, the literal meaning of the words (what, following Paul, he calls the 'letter') was not the meaning intended by God. It was put there by God to alert us to the need to look more deeply for a 'spiritual' meaning.

In obedience to the Saviour's precept that says: 'Search the Scriptures', one must carefully investigate how far the literal meaning is true, how far it is impossible, and to the utmost of one's power one must trace out from the use of similar expressions the meaning scattered everywhere through the scriptures of that which, when taken literally, is impossible.

– On Principles, Book 4, 19-20

Origen's attempt to read all the scripture in the light of Jesus has its value, and it influenced interpretation right down to our own day. It has, however, two limitations. Firstly, it does not attempt to discover the meaning the Scriptures had in their own limited historical setting. Origen's focus was on Jesus and therefore on what he saw as the fullness of revelation. He was not concerned with the human imperfections of God's inspired instruments. Secondly, since he lacked appropriate criteria to check the allegorical meanings that he found in the texts, there was the obvious danger of reading into the inspired word meanings that had no connection with their intended meaning. For all the beauty of their reflections, this lack of clarity recurs regularly in the writings of the fathers of the Church, of the medieval scholastics, and of pre-modern theological manuals. Their methods of interpretation carry with them the danger of using scriptural texts to support positions (however valid), instead of being open to the surprise of God's inspired word.

Modern scholarship shares the attempt of earlier times to reflect on the sacred texts in order to remember the past and to discern in the present the presence and action of God. It is also committed to attempt something that was not possible in earlier times; namely, to discover the meaning the texts had for those who were inspired to write them. The tools to attempt this were not previously available. It is not always an easy task to know when texts were composed, what words and phrases meant in their original context, and what kinds of questions ancient writers were addressing when they composed their texts. However, to the extent that our attempt is successful it does help us avoid the danger of reading meanings into a text that are alien to the meaning intended by its authors and the meaning understood by those to whom the text was originally addressed. The attempt to enter into the world of the inspired authors can also have the advantage of opening us up to the fresh surprise of the inspired texts, and in this way enrich the reflections we must make on God's presence and action in our times.

Inspiration

It is important to attempt to clarify what we mean when we say that the texts are 'inspired by God', for our understanding of inspiration will surely affect the way we read the texts, if not consciously then certainly unconsciously. We begin with four preliminary considerations. The first is the importance of recognising that revelation and inspiration are not restricted to the biblical texts and their authors. As Paul says: God 'desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth'(1Timothy 2:4). Jesus assures us that God wants everyone to 'have life and have it abundantly'(John 10:10). It follows that God must constantly be revealing himself to everyone, and inspiring everyone to respond to grace in the most liberating and creative way, special to each person. Pope John-Paul II expresses this simply in his encyclical *The Mission of the Redeemer* when he writes: 'Every authentic prayer is prompted by the Holy Spirit who is mysteriously present in every human heart'(n.29).

Of course, it is one thing for God to reveal himself. It is another for a person to recognise and respond to the revelation. When Jesus expresses his delight that God has revealed himself to 'little children'(Matthew 11:25), he is not saying that God is not revealing himself to others. Rather, he is delighting in the fact that there are those who are open to receive and welcome the revelation.

Inspiration

These are the ‘poor in spirit’(Matthew 5:5), the ‘humble’(Matthew 18:4), the ‘meek and humble of heart’, like himself (Matthew 11:29). Did he not exclaim once: ‘Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it’(Matthew 10:15)? Our first point, then, is that when we inquire about inspiration we are not looking for something found only in the Bible. Rather, we are looking for what makes the inspiration and revelation that we find there so special.

Secondly, while it is true that the claim that the texts are inspired and reveal God is not subject to any scientific proof, it is also true that it is not an arbitrary claim. It is based on experience, for the texts have been found to be inspiring, and have helped people live beautiful and truthful lives by any standards that we might reasonably apply. People have continued to experience a special link between these texts and their experience of God. In the final analysis, the claim is an expression of how a community understands itself. Jesus’ words apply here: ‘You will know them by their fruits’(Matthew 7:16), as does his invitation: ‘Come and see’(John 1:39).

Thirdly, we note two statements from the New Testament on the subject of inspiration. One is from Paul who writes to Timothy: ‘All scripture, inspired by God, is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness’(2Timothy 3:16). Paul is speaking of the ‘Old Testament’(an expression used by Paul in 2Corinthians 3:14), and he is encouraging Timothy to draw inspiration from the sacred scriptures, for they are useful in living a life that is faithful to God, and useful also in teaching others. The other statement is from Peter who states that ‘no prophecy ever came by human will, but men and women moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God’(2Peter 1:21).

Philo, a Jewish writer of the first century, makes the same point: ‘A prophet has no utterance of his own. All his utterances come from elsewhere. They echo the voice of Another’(*Who is the Heir*, 259). We have an example of this in Jeremiah, who tells us that he is tired of the rejection he experiences when he relays to the people what comes to him in his prayer. Yet he has to speak, for, as he says: ‘within me there is something like a burning fire shut up in my bones; I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot’(Jeremiah 20:9).

Peter’s statement and the above texts give us some insight into certain experiences of individual prophets and into some of the material found in the prophetic scrolls. However, there is no justification for generalising and seeing the prophetic experience as a model for inspiration throughout the Bible. The prophetic scrolls do not claim that everything in them was spoken to the prophet by YHWH.

Fourthly, it is clear that Jesus has profound respect for the sacred scriptures. He states that ‘Scripture cannot be deprived of its validity’(John 10:35), and he warns against failing to obey it (see Matthew 5:19). This does not mean, however, that Jesus or his disciples judge the Older Testament to be the last word of God on any issue. Quite the contrary. Jesus’ disciples see him as the fulfilment of God’s promises to them, such that all previous expressions of God’s revelation have to give way before the revelation offered in Jesus. They speak of Jesus *fulfilling* the words of the prophets – including the words found in the Isaiah scroll.

Those among Jesus' contemporaries who considered themselves to be experts in the scriptures were the ones most offended by the freedom that Jesus, and later Paul, had to by-pass or correct scripture in order to give expression to its essential thrust.

Having made these preliminary points, let us now try to understand what it is we are claiming when we say with Paul that 'all scripture is inspired by God' (2Timothy 3:16). Firstly, we are not claiming that inspiration means that God dictated the words that the inspired authors wrote. As noted above, there were times when the prophets experienced something close to this. We read in Jeremiah, for example: 'YHWH^{*} put out his hand and touched my mouth; and YHWH said to me, "Now I have put my words in your mouth"' (Jeremiah 1:9). On another occasion Jeremiah was told: 'Take a scroll and write on it all the words that I have spoken to you' (Jeremiah 36:2).

However, even then, the words spoken or written by Jeremiah (and the same goes for Isaiah) were Hebrew words with their own necessary limitations. Nor did God choose Isaiah because he was a man who was not of his time. If God is going to inspire someone to speak the truth, God must choose a limited, real, human being. There are no others from whom to choose. Furthermore, what the prophet had to say was directed to real people with their own real limitations of language, culture and experience. Many generations of scribes worked on the material we find in the Isaiah scroll. Inspiration must include a special providence that guided this process.

We might wish it were otherwise. We might wish that the truths inspired by God in the sacred scriptures connected us immediately to God in such a way as to give the reader a share in God's absolute truth. For then we would not have to undertake the task of finding out what it was that the inspired authors were actually saying, or how they were understood by their contemporaries, or why their words were treasured, copied and handed on. The inspired texts guided people to live their lives in their real world. They did not remove them from it. In his commentary on Isaiah 1-39 in the Anchor Bible Series (Doubleday 2000), Joseph Blenkinsopp expresses what seems to me to be a key insight that we need to have if we want to understand inspiration. He speaks of 'an Isaian tradition carried forward by means of a cumulative process of reinterpretation and reapplication' (page 74). Making the same point later he writes: 'The book has undergone successive restructuring and rearrangement in the course of a long editorial history' (page 83).

The biblical authors were faithful to the writings that they inherited, for they saw them as an inspired expression of the action of YHWH in their history. They pored over them, wanting to discover the will of YHWH. They also reflected on the meaning of past events for them and for their contemporaries. It would make life easier for us if they had kept their comments and reflections separate from the inherited texts, but that was not their way. They expressed their reflections in comments within the text, and in the way they restructured and rearranged the material. They also reinterpreted the texts in the light of their contemporary experience and presented the text in ways that shed light on what was happening to them.

Inspiration

This makes it difficult at times to know with certainty which parts of the text can safely be attributed to the original author, to the prophet Isaiah, and which parts are the result of later scribal-prophetic reflection. In any case, inspiration has to be thought of as covering the whole process of transmission including the insights of the prophets and scribes that diligently explored, reshaped, and added to, the material that they inherited. We must learn from them, so that when we read these texts, we, too, are open to God's spirit inspiring us to see the implications of the sacred text to ourselves and to our world.

Surely inspiration must be speaking about the presence of God's Spirit guiding people in their lives and in their teaching, including those who composed the final text and those who welcomed it as a true (though, of course, necessarily, limited) expression of their faith convictions. For, in the final analysis, it is the community of believers that recognises the texts as inspired, because it is the community that continues to find them inspiring.

We might think of Beethoven being 'inspired' to compose the music. At times we might find a particular conductor 'inspired' in the way he can bring the best out of the orchestra and translate the wonder of the score in a striking way. Finally if no one finds the music or the performance inspiring, it is unlikely to long survive. Those responsible for the texts that we experience as inspired wanted their contemporaries to listen to the past so as to listen to the ways – at times the surprisingly new ways – that God was inspiring them to live now. The texts are religious texts intended to encourage fidelity and prayer. Saint Augustine insists that all the scriptures are there to provoke love – and we could add gratitude, repentance, praise and joy.

God's inspiration is everywhere. God's grace bears its marvellous fruit wherever people are attentive to this inspiration and let it guide them. What is special to the texts of the sacred scriptures is that the people of Israel (not just individual Israelites) considered them to give expression to God's action among them and so to their faith. Disciples of Jesus continued to see them in this way in so far as these sacred writings reached their fulfilment in Jesus. To say that the material we are about to study is inspired is to accept that there was indeed a special divine providence guiding the people of Israel, and that this providence encompassed the writings which the community accepted as giving a genuine (if necessarily limited and imperfect) understanding of God's action in their history.

As the Second Vatican Council states, we can be confident that these texts express 'without error *that truth which God willed to be put down in the sacred writings for the sake of our salvation*' (*Dei Verbum*, 11). Before all else the Bible is a truthful statement of God's faithful love, expressed of course in the limited, imperfect, and historically conditioned way in which human authors necessarily speak and write of such matters. The community considers these texts foundational, and continues to experience God's inspiration through them. If we are to be open to the movements of God's Spirit as we read them, if we are to read these texts in the spirit in which they were written and preserved, and be guided in our response to God's will in the changing circumstances of our lives, we must do all we can to understand what the texts aimed to say and why they were preserved and handed down to us.

While doing all we can to read the texts of the Older Testament within their own context, it remains important that the texts be read from within the faith community to which they belong. For Christians, this means to read the texts in the light of Jesus, the one in whom God's word was made flesh, and in our reading to be guided by his Spirit. Yet even here, this is not enough. Even with the help of Jesus walking with them the disciples on the road to Emmaus did not understand the meaning of the scriptures till they encountered Jesus 'in the breaking of bread' (Luke 24:35). It is at the Eucharist, when Jesus' disciples assemble, that the texts have their proper place, just as they were read when the people of Israel assembled in the temple or the synagogue to remember and to celebrate their faith.

Those who claim that the sacred scriptures are inspired are not claiming that they are free from error in areas that are not central to the witness that they give of God's action in the history of Israel and of how the people ought to respond. It is essential also to recognise that even in this their central thrust, they are human documents and, as we shall hope to show, they are not free from mistaken assumptions that were part of their time and their culture. However, with all these necessary limitations, they continue to inspire, for in their precise beauty they reveal God. To say that these texts are inspired is to say that God was guiding his people, and that this guidance includes a special providence in guiding the writings in which their history is expressed. In much the same way Christians trust that the Spirit of Jesus is with us guiding us to the fullness of truth (see John 16:13; Matthew 28:20). The authority of scripture lies in the power these texts have to transform people's lives.

The inspired authors.

Real people, from their real experiences, wrote the words we are going to read in the Book of Isaiah and they wrote them for real people. We want to get as close as we can to understand the historical situation from within which they wrote and the perspective from which they viewed their world. Not to attempt to do so would be to run the risk of missing the limits, and so the precise beauty and truth, of their insights. Who are we to think that we will not fall into the trap of using the biblical text to support our prejudices, of hiding behind the words of scripture to avoid the enlightenment that they offer? If we can discover what the authors were intending to say, why they wrote as they did, how they were understood, and why people treasured what they wrote – if we can discover this, then we can have some confidence that we are open to their real and inspired beauty and truth, and that we are to some extent protected against the real danger of using the texts to support our own uninspired prejudices.

Prior to the 18th Century everyone assumed that Isaiah ben Amoz was responsible for the prophecies in the book that bears his name. They could be excused for thinking that the text, therefore, gives direct insights into the communications received by Isaiah in prayer. What we have learned, especially over the past hundred and more years, has brought us to a new place, and we must adjust our thinking. As I hope to show, what we have learned takes nothing from the beauty and power of the texts. In fact, freed from the assumption that Isaiah was the sole author, we are free to allow the texts to guide us in a way that is faithful to the insights that the inspired authors were conveying.

Isaiah

Read this way the texts can communicate their beauty and their truth more clearly, and open for us new depths of meaning that can enrich and enlighten us, and guide us in ways that we never thought possible. Here as in all matters we need have no fear of the truth, for it will set us free.

What can modern scholarship tell us about the authors of the Isaiah scroll? We cannot hope to achieve complete success here. Scholars still differ among themselves, even on significant details. However there does seem to be a converging of probabilities happening, and I offer the following summary in the confidence that it will provide a safe guide as we attempt to read these texts in a way that is open to their rich and inspired insights. The attempt itself to seek answers liberates us from the worst excesses and distortions that happen when we impose our mistaken assumptions onto the text. Furthermore, as I hope the reader will find for him/herself, the journey will help us be surprised by the amazing wealth of wisdom that the inspired texts have to offer.

The prophet Isaiah ben Amoz

References to the prophet Isaiah are found only in the first thirty-nine chapters of the Isaiah scroll. Let us begin by limiting ourselves to these chapters. The scribes responsible for compiling the Isaiah scroll introduce it with the words ‘The vision of Isaiah son of Amoz, which he saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah’ (Isaiah 1:1). This locates the prophet Isaiah in the second half of the eighth century BC.

During King Uzziah’s long reign (785-734), Judah reached its highest point of economic and military power since the division of the kingdom at the death of Solomon (c.931 – see 2Kings 15:1-3; 2Chronicles 26:6-15). The army was modernised; the conquering of the Philistine plain established control over the trade route along the Mediterranean coast; there was commercial expansion into Arabia and the construction of the copper and iron mining town of Elath on the gulf of Aqabah; and developments were experienced also in agriculture. Syria was a constant irritant to Uzziah, and to his contemporary in Israel, Jeroboam II (c.788-748). In 749 Uzziah contracted a chronic scaly skin condition that forced him to retire from public life. He died 734. Isaiah chapter six records a vision that Isaiah had ‘in the year that King Uzziah died’ (6:1). It is likely that Isaiah was active in the period just prior to Uzziah’s death (see Isaiah 2-5), a period that corresponded with the aggressive expansion of Assyria, propelled by King Tiglath-pileser III (744-726).

King Uzziah was succeeded by his son, Jotham, who acted as regent during the years of his father’s retirement (c. 749-734). Jotham died in 734 and was succeeded by Ahaz. Syria and Israel united forces to defend themselves against Assyria’s aggressive expansionist policies. They tried to get Judah to join the alliance and when they experienced resistance from the advisers of the young king, Ahaz, they tried to put their own ruler on the throne of Judah. In Isaiah chapters six to eight we read of Isaiah’s attempt to advise Ahaz to resist joining the alliance, and also to resist calling on Assyria for help. (For more on this see pages 52-53). There was an internal struggle in Israel, between those who were for appeasement and those who were determined to fight for independence. This continued during the reigns of Tiglath-pileser and his successor, Shalmaneser V (726-722), and into the reign of Sargon II (722-705).

In Israel, assassination followed assassination, till refusal to pay tribute led to the occupation of Israel, the destruction of Samaria and the deportation of its leading citizens (721). Many from the north fled south and there was a huge expansion of Jerusalem as a result. Because of an inconsistency in the record it is not clear whether Ahaz was still king in Judah at the time, or whether his son, Hezekiah had already succeeded him. In 2 Kings 18:9–10 the conquest of Samaria (721) is recorded as taking place in the sixth year of Hezekiah's reign. This would place the beginning of his reign in 727. However, in 2 Kings 18:13 Sennacherib's conquest of 701 is said to have taken place in Hezekiah's fourteenth year, which would place the beginning of his reign in 715. In either case it was during the reign of King Hezekiah that the Assyrian army put down a revolt by the Philistine city of Ashdod (713-711). The scroll tells us that Isaiah warned against Judah getting involved. He did so in dramatic style by moving around Jerusalem dressed (undressed) like a prisoner of war (see Isaiah 20:1-6).

Isaiah's final intervention (see Isaiah 36-37) was during the reign of the Assyrian king, Sennacherib, who succeeded Sargon II in 705. The death of Sargon led to revolts in every section of the Assyrian Empire. Hezekiah seems to have played a significant role in organising rebellion in Palestine. Isaiah was active in attempting to deter him from a policy which he saw as a failure to trust in YHWH. Hezekiah went ahead and Judah was devastated by the Assyrian army in 701. Jerusalem itself survived, probably because when Lachish was conquered Hezekiah surrendered and paid a huge tribute (see 2Kings 18:14-16). The Assyrian army was also needed back in Assyria.

Since so much of Isaiah's preaching happened during the reign of King Hezekiah, it is worth recording the judgment passed on Hezekiah by the authors of the Deuteronomic history.

Hezekiah did what was right in the sight of YHWH just as his ancestor David had done. He removed the high places, broke down the pillars, and cut down the sacred pole ... He trusted in YHWH the God of Israel; so that there was no one like him among all the kings of Judah after him, or among those who were before him. For he held fast to YHWH; he did not depart from following him but kept the commandments that YHWH commanded Moses. YHWH was with him; wherever he went, he prospered. He rebelled against the king of Assyria and would not serve him.

2Kings 18:3-7

We will find that the picture of Hezekiah found in the Second Book of Kings (and included in Isaiah 36-39) does not fit well with the picture we get from reading Isaiah's words.

The Isaiah 'School'

The words of Isaiah ben Amoz are preserved in the first thirty-nine chapters of the Isaiah scroll. However these chapters contain many later expansions and comments. Some think of these later expansions and comments, as well as the material in the Isaiah scroll chapters 40-66, as being the work of prophets and scribes who saw themselves as disciples of Isaiah and who preserved his words, for they saw them as an inspired expression of the action of YHWH in their history. They pored over them, wanting to discover the will of YHWH. They also reflected on the meaning of the texts for them and for their contemporaries.

Judah in the seventh century

Since this work of preserving, commenting, arranging and updating went on for at least two hundred and fifty years (from 700-450 – some would say even later), it is necessary to trace here the main lines of the history of Judah from the seventh century to the post-exilic years. Elements of the historical experience of these years are reflected in the texts found in the Isaiah scroll.

The seventh century BC

The collapse of Judah in 701 meant the collapse, too, of Hezekiah's attempt at religious reform. Hezekiah's son, Manasseh (698-643), inherited his father's failed revolt and had no choice but to submit to being a vassal of the Assyrian king, Sennacherib. There would have been those in Judah, including probably priests from the smaller sanctuaries, who blamed Hezekiah for the way things turned out, and many welcomed Manasseh's long reign. Things fell apart religiously (see the Deuteronomic judgment on him in 2Kings 21), but because he was a loyal vassal of the powerful Assyrian king there was peace in Judah and growing economic prosperity. Manasseh's son, Amon, succeeded his father on the throne but was assassinated after only two years and in 640 Amon's eight-year old son, Josiah, inherited the throne. Ashurbanipal, king of Assyria, died in 628, and Josiah, now twenty and able to take control in his own name, picked up where his great-grandfather, Hezekiah, had left off.

Assyria was preoccupied with the rising power of Babylon, and Josiah took the opportunity to throw off the vassalage that had kept Judah subject to Assyria for the previous sixty years. He was determined to win back for Judah the kingdom reigned over by David, and he brooked no opposition in his determination to reform the religious life of his people. Summarising his reign, the historians of the Deuteronomic School wrote:

Before him there was no king like him, who turned to YHWH with all his heart, with all his soul, and with all his might, according to all the law of Moses; nor did any like him arise after him.

– 2Kings 23:25

Some of the reflections of the Isaiah School that we find scattered throughout Isaiah 1-39 may be applications of Isaiah's teaching to the situation prevailing during Josiah's reign. From 628 to 609 Josiah went from success to success. He cleared Judah and the reconquered territories of cult sites, and expanded the borders in every direction. However, tragedy struck in 609 when the Egyptian Pharaoh, Necho, on his way to support Assyria in its war with Babylon, had Josiah assassinated at Megiddo. In 597 Jerusalem surrendered to the Babylonian king, Nebuchadnezzar, and Josiah's grandson, Jehoiachin, and over 3,000 of the leading citizens were taken into exile (see Jeremiah 52:28-30). Ten years later an ill-conceived revolt led to the destruction of the city and the temple and a second wave of exiles (832 according to the Jeremiah text). A further 745 were deported when Gedaliah, the governor appointed by Babylon, was assassinated.

The Babylonian Exile

Blenkinsopp (Isaiah 40-55, page 100) writes:

Beginning with the first capture of Jerusalem in 597, Judean deportees were resettled in southern Mesopotamia, and some of the names of their settlements are known: Tel-abib (*til-abūbi*, “Mound of the deluge”) on the “river Chebar” (*nār kabāri*, identified with the *Shatt en-nil* near Nippur), Tel-melach (“Salt Mound”), Tel-harsha, Cherub, Addan, Immer, Ahava, Casiphia (Ezekiel 1:1; 3:15; Ezra 2:59 = Nehemiah 7:61; Ezra 8:15-17). The deportees were introduced into a situation of considerable ethnic diversity, including settlements of Lydians, Carians, Elamites, Egyptians, and others.

For economic reasons they were not, it appears, used as slaves. Rather they were settled in areas that needed redevelopment (see the various ‘Tels’ mentioned above). The internal affairs of the community were in the hands of elders (see Ezekiel 8:1; 14:1; 20:1,3; Jeremiah 29:1). Separation from the Temple and the cult put the emphasis on the regular meeting of the community (the ‘synagogues’).

The Babylonian Exile (597-538) demanded an enormous religious adjustment. In spite of all the hopes built upon promises understood to have come from their God, the Promised Land had been taken from them. Despite the assurances that they had been given that Jerusalem would not be defeated by a foreign king – assurances that were reinforced when Sennacherib failed to capture the city in 701 – the Babylonian army had razed YHWH’s city to the ground. Despite assurances that God would guarantee the dynasty of David, they had lost their king. Despite their belief that the temple was the house of their God, YHWH, it had been destroyed. Any national, institutional basis for their religious identity had been swept away. If they were going to retain any sense of themselves as a people, they had to discover a firmer basis. They had to learn a new humility, and find a deeper faith in God, independent of political and economic success.

In Babylon, they found themselves living in what was, in many ways, a superior culture, but not religiously. The concept of monotheism (there is only one God), as distinct from monolatry (among the gods only YHWH is to be worshipped) began to emerge (see Isaiah 44:6-23; 45:18-25), as well as a sense of their missionary vocation (see Isaiah 42:1-4; 49:6). Instead of identifying themselves in relation to the Davidic dynasty, they began to see themselves as a community defined by worship. In the absence of the temple they began to come together to remember and to pray. This was the beginning of the institution of the synagogue, which has remained central to Judaism ever since. They had to ask themselves how the loss of the land, the temple and the monarchy could have happened. It was impossible for them to contemplate the possibility that their God, YHWH, was weaker than the gods of the Babylonians. So they concluded that it must have been their God who brought about the catastrophe that they were experiencing. Since God is just, the problem had to be their infidelity to their part of the covenant, and they interpreted their loss and suffering as God’s punishment for their sin, as God’s way of purifying them.

Where had they gone wrong? What must they do to bring about the purification without which they could not enjoy God’s blessing? These are some of the questions that were being asked by a number of different ‘Schools’ during the long years of exile.

The Babylonian Exile

The Deuteronomic School was working on a comprehensive ‘history’ to reflect on what had gone wrong and to provide a guide for future leaders. The Priestly School was working on composing an accurate record of the cult. In different ways both were exploring the essential ethical dimension of what it means to be YHWH’s chosen people. A dramatic turn of events came with the victories of Cyrus II of Persia. The ailing Babylonian Empire was ruled by the usurper Nabonidus who reigned from 555 to 539. In 550 Cyrus of Persia conquered Ecbatana, the capital of Media (west-central Iran). Three years later he captured Sardis, the capital of Lydia (western Turkey). Then he took Susa, the capital of Elam (at the foot of the Zagros Mountains in the Khuzistan region of Iran). News of Cyrus’s victories and of his policy of allowing exiles to return to their homeland awakened a similar hope in the exiles from Judah.

It is to this period that we owe the material now found in the Isaiah scroll in chapters 40-55. This has generally been attributed to an anonymous prophet who, because his prophecies are included in the Isaiah scroll, has gone under the name of ‘Deutero-Isaiah’. Increasingly, it looks more likely that we owe this writing to a ‘school’ of prophet-scribes. It is possible that we have to thank the members of the Isaiah School in exile for this beautiful material. However, since there is so little similarity in content or style with the material in Isaiah 1-39, it seems more likely that those responsible for these reflections were a group with close connections to the temple singers responsible for the psalms. Along with others, they did find in Isaiah’s words at the time of the Assyrian aggression a model for discerning God’s will when Babylon had replaced Assyria as the ‘evil empire’. If the exilic authors of Isaiah 40-55 did not have an especially close connection with Isaiah themselves, they or later members of the same movement or School ‘adopted’ Isaiah after the return from exile. We will return to this shortly.

In a paper presented in 2007, my confrere, Ulrich Berges msc, put it this way (Farewell to Deutero-Isaiah or prophecy without a prophet, in: A. Lemaire (ed.), in: *Vetus Testamentum Supplements*, Congress Volume Ljubljana 2007, forthcoming).

It is not the prophetic genius, the prophet as theologian, who created this drama of hope, but a group of skilled literary craftsmen who began their work on Babylonian soil, seeing in Cyrus the sign of YHWH’s sovereignty over all forces in heaven and on earth.

These prophet-scribes saw Cyrus as the instrument raised up by YHWH, the lord of creation and the lord of history, to liberate his people. Their exile, which the Babylonians saw as proof of the superiority of their god over YHWH, is presented by the Isaiah School as a victory for YHWH who raised up the Babylonian power to purify Judah. Now YHWH, in fulfilment of earlier prophecies, was raising up another foreign power, Persia, to take his purified people back to the Promised Land. We will have more to say on this when we introduce chapters 40-55 (see pages 140-142).

Back in Judah after the Return from Exile

The members of this School of temple singers who returned to Judah after the exile had not only the experience of the fall of Jerusalem and the Exile to ponder over, they also experienced the ‘miracle’ of the fall of Babylon to Cyrus of Persia, and his edict allowing the exiles to return home to the Promised Land.

In *Introduction to Reading the Pentateuch* (Eisenbrauns 2006, page 141) Jean Louis Ska SJ writes: ‘The reconstruction of the temple and the restoration of a faith-community within the Persian Empire created a new situation that undoubtedly called for the revision and reinterpretation of the “data” presented by the sources and the most ancient traditions.’ Ska is speaking of the authors of the Pentateuch, but his words hold true also of those who reflected on the Isaiah heritage and reapplied it to the post-exilic situation in Judah. They were determined not to repeat the mistakes of the past, and to form again the people of Israel, worshipping God faithfully in the restored temple and faithful to the covenant made with them long ago by God. They added the material found in the Isaiah scroll 56-66 (we will return to this when introducing these chapters, pages 210-212). They continued to comment on, update, and rearrange the material now found in Isaiah 1-39, as well as the material now found in Isaiah 40-55. All the time they were making closer links between the three sections of the Isaiah scroll. Their creative work continued down to the time of Ezra in the middle of the fifth century. Some would see it as going on into the third century BC.

As noted earlier, it will not always be possible to state confidently whether we are reading a reflection that comes from a time before, during or after the exile, but we can, to some degree, discover why the post-exilic writers organised the text the way we find it, how they introduced and linked various sayings of Isaiah, and how they understood them in the light of their experiences. To the extent that we can do this we can be confident that we are in touch with the inspired text, and we can be protected against reading meanings into it that are at variance with the inspired intention of those responsible for the text as we have it.

They had experienced a terrible disaster, but also an amazing resurrection. Faced with the need to re-establish themselves as a people in the very different circumstances of a reduced Judah ruled from Persia, it was all the more important to assert that their God, YHWH, the creator of the universe, is the lord of history. Their return was itself a proof of the power and fidelity of YHWH to the promises made through Isaiah and through the inspired writers of the ‘Isaiah School’.

Defective concepts of God

We began this Introduction by pointing out that beauty and truth are always precise, delineated, defined. We then examined what we mean when we claim that the Bible is inspired. Now, in the light of what we have written about the necessarily limited views of those inspired by God to compose these texts, we should look at some of the main limitations of understanding that pervade the literature we are about to study, both in regard to their way of conceiving God, and in their way of understanding the appropriate human response to God’s revelation. I am encouraged to do this by the words of Karl Rahner: ‘Theology can create openings for adventures of the mind and heart, if we have but the courage to embark upon them, and both the courage and the humility to retrace our steps as soon as we become aware of having erred’ (*Inspiration in the Bible*, page 7).

There are as many concepts of God as there are minds that conceive, for God cannot be observed directly, put to the test, and made subject to human comprehension and definition.

Many concepts of God are clearly erroneous: the so-called ‘god’ who controls the world from outside; the so-called ‘god’ who is exalted at the expense of humanity; the so-called ‘god’ who upholds vested interests, who justifies the successful, who supports apartheid, patriarchy, hypocritical piety, immature dependency and infantile illusions. ‘God’ can be a projection of our fears: another word for fate, the stars, demons. ‘God’ can be a projection of our needs for self-indulgence, prestige, or power. ‘God’ can be a support for our insecurity, anchoring a meaningless life in submission to a power-object. We should not expect the authors of the Pentateuch to be completely free from some of these erroneous ways of thinking. As we emphasised when we looked at inspiration, if God is going to inspire someone to communicate a truth, God is going to have to inspire a limited human being. There are no unlimited human beings to inspire! We do not have to assume that the authors of the texts we are going to study knew everything about everything, and, if we are going to appreciate the truth that they were inspired to write, we need to be aware of where their thinking was limited. Three key areas stand out.

Monotheism

Firstly, not all the material we are about to study is clear on the subject of monotheism. True, in the post-exilic period, the idea of monotheism was in the air, but how thorough was it? Genuine monotheism includes the amazing insight that the mysterious divine presence with whom we experience a profound communion is the one ‘God’ present and revealed in different ways in different cultures. The writings we are going to study often show the kind of profound respect for other peoples that is surely essential to genuine monotheism. But not always. Where they fall short they fall short of genuine monotheism, for if one genuinely believes that it is the one God who is at the heart of everything, and is expressed and revealed through everything, then one would not disrespect others just because they are different from ‘us’. We would still have to deal with error – our own and other people’s, but surely monotheism includes the insight that everything is fundamentally an expression of the one Source and so is fundamentally sacred.

Enemies of Israel are enemies of God

A second assumption found throughout much of the Hebrew Scriptures is that the enemies of Israel are also the enemies of God. In the Isaiah scroll first Assyria, then Babylon, and finally Edom are portrayed, for the most part, as enemies of YHWH, though we will find texts that open up to a more universalist view of God’s love. It is this more universalist view that is endorsed by Jesus: ‘You have heard that it was said: you shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy. But I say to you: love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous’ (Matthew 5:43-45).

A God who controls the world

A third assumption is that God controls nature and history, such that happenings that are judged to be good are seen as expressions of God’s blessing, whereas happenings that are judged to be bad are seen as expressions of God’s disapproval and punishment. This way of looking at things permeates the texts we are studying.

The basis for this misunderstanding is their way of thinking of 'power'. In our human experience power is often abused. It is often expressed as control. When the authors think of God as 'Almighty', declaring their faith that there are no limits to God's power, they have not yet come to the insight (so clear in the life and words of Jesus) that God is love, and consequently that the power God has is the power of love. It is God's love-power that has no limits. God has chosen not to control. No wonder it was difficult for Jesus' contemporaries to see God's 'almighty power' revealed in the one who was crucified on Calvary. Paul recognised this as 'a stumbling block for the Jews'(1Corinthians 1:23).

When, as adults, we experience someone attempting to control us, we do not experience this as love. While love is demanding, and is willing to challenge and correct, it never controls. Love respects others as sacred and respects their freedom. Love does not (cannot) protect us from suffering the consequences of our misuse or abuse of freedom, for love loves; it does not control. The idea of God controlling is so embedded in our psyche that we have to be determined if we are to listen attentively to Jesus, and watch him reveal God as precisely not controlling. Jesus wept with disappointment over Jerusalem; he did not reorganize it. He could see what would happen to the city if people did not change, but he didn't punish it. Jesus pleaded with Judas; he did not take control.

The texts we are about to study are clear in presenting the compassion and fidelity of God. They are also aware of the responsibility of human beings for bringing about the suffering that we experience. However, they still portray God as the one who organised the disasters that afflicted Judah, in order to purify the people, and it is God who brings about the collapse of the 'evil empires'.

In saying that God does not control the world we are not saying that God is doing nothing. God loves. This is the love of which Paul speaks: 'Love has space enough to hold and to bear everything and everyone. Love believes all things, hopes all things, and endures whatever comes. Love does not come to an end' (1Corinthians 13:7-8). We have come to see that creation is free to evolve according to the natural interaction of its energies. God does not intervene to cut across this. God is constantly acting in creation, by loving. When creation is open to God's action, beautiful, 'miraculous' things happen. This is the way God has chosen creation to be: an explosion of love, and so an explosion of being that is essentially free and not determined. We experience this. When we open ourselves to welcome God's providence, divine love bears fruit in our lives. Closing ourselves to God's gracious will is what we call sin. God respects our freedom even when our choices hurt us and hurt others. But God continues to offer healing, forgiving, creating love. Many of the texts we will be reading state this, and state it beautifully, but they are not consistent, and the way the authors understand God's relationship with the world is quite different.

We do not see God favouring the Babylonians over Jerusalem just because they were victorious. So we do not assume that Jerusalem was destroyed because of human sin. However, it is clear that the authors of the Isaiah scroll thought this way. Jesus' contemporaries assumed that a person was blind because he was being punished for sin (see John 9:2). They assumed Jesus was being punished by God when they saw him being crucified. They were wrong.

Ways of conceiving God

We no longer assume that things happen because they are either directly willed or directly allowed by a God who controls everything. If we are looking for what God is doing we have learned to look for love. We don't – or at least we shouldn't – assume that it was God who determined that Jesus would be crucified. Jesus was crucified by people who chose to resist God's will. What God willed was that Jesus respond in love, and that is what happened, because Jesus chose to listen and to respond to grace.

The authors of the texts we are about to read understood miracles as divine intervention, rather than as examples of what happens when we human beings open ourselves to God's constant loving action in our lives and in our world. To use Jesus' image, the sun and the rain are constant and are offered to everyone. 'Miracles' are what happens when we welcome God's action and allow God's grace to bear fruit in our lives.

The understanding present in the texts we are about to read is still shared by many. Some still want God to intervene when what we should be doing is opening ourselves to love, and helping others to do the same. If we were to do this, think of the 'miracles' that would happen in this world: miracles that only God's love can make possible. Jesus revealed God as love. God's love is all-powerful. We can pray, like a child, for whatever it is we desire, so long as we open ourselves to love and allow love to work its purifying and energising effect in us and in our world – so long as we conclude our prayer, as Jesus did, with the words: 'Not my will but yours be done' (Mark 14:36).

In the course of history these texts have inspired people from every culture. Their meaning has also been covered over, much as wood is covered with layer upon layer of paint till we have no idea of its native beauty. People continue to use the texts to claim divine authority for their own prejudices and unexplored assumptions. The texts have purified cultures. Cultures have also accommodated the texts to support their failure to be converted by them.

We cannot avoid bringing our own assumptions to the text in the questions we ask of it, and so in the answers we find. But at least we must make the effort to check what we claim as our insights by examining the meaning of the words used – the meaning then, not now – and the literary forms, and the way the editors chose to link their sources. I hope the value of this undertaking will be clear to those who choose to walk this journey with me. It has been my pleasure and privilege to be guided by the scholars who have devoted their time and talent to guiding me. I hope you enjoy the journey.

Post-exilic Judah

