

ISAIAH 1-12

Title (1:1)

¹The 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.

As noted in the Introduction, the post-exilic members of the Isaiah School who put the Isaiah scroll together used this as a title to cover the whole work, which consists in the words spoken by the prophet Isaiah in the closing third of the eighth century BC as these words have been reinterpreted and reapplied over the intervening years, as well as commentary built up over centuries of a long editorial history.

The word ‘vision’ (ḥāzôn) is used here in a more general sense of ‘revelation (see also 2Chronicles 32:32 and Sirach 48:22). Isaiah’s prophetic mission is envisaged as covering four decades. It is the same with Jeremiah (see Jeremiah 1:1-3). We are surely right to suspect that forty has symbolic rather than chronological intent.

The name ‘Isaiah’ (yeša‘yāhû) is formed from the verbal stem yš‘ and means ‘may YHWH save’ (or ‘YHWH will save’). The Bible is full of examples of word play on personal names. Salvation will be a key theme in these opening chapters (see especially 12:1-13).

Isaiah chapter one

Chapter One stands alone. It is recitative, rhetorical prose that at times merits to be termed poetry. It functions as a summary of Isaiah’s key themes and some verses may be oracles spoken at the time of Sennacherib’s devastation of Judah in 701BC, which the prophet blames on the failure of justice, especially on the part of the leadership. Isaiah is particularly scathing of injustice that tries to hide behind conventional religious practice. The terrible devastation of Judah is the consequence of the failure of social justice. YHWH is angry, but offers salvation which Judah can experience only if the people truly repent.

²Hear, O heavens, and listen, O earth; for YHWH is speaking:

There are echoes here of the opening words of Moses’ declaration to ‘all Israel’:

Give ear, O heavens, and I will speak; let the earth hear the words of my mouth.

– Deuteronomy 32:1

Heaven and earth have witnessed the whole of history. They are in the best position to witness Israel’s extraordinary obtuseness, which involves, as we will see, looking to false gods, entering foolishly into political alliances that involve them in religious compromise, and rejecting God’s word mediated to them through the prophet..

**I reared children and brought them up,
but they have rebelled against me.**

Yahweh is reproaching his people like the father of the family. Compare Hosea 11:1-4.

When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son.

The more I called him, the more he went from me ...

Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk, I took him up in my arms;

but he did not know that it was I who healed him.

I led him with cords of human kindness, with bands of love.

I was to him like one who lifts an infant to his cheek.

I bent down to him and fed him.

Hosea has YHWH responding to the infidelity of his ‘children’ by declaring:

Because of the wickedness of their deeds I will drive them out of my house.
I will love them no more; all their officials are rebels.

– Hosea 9:15

See, too, Deuteronomy 32:18, ‘You forgot the God who gave you birth.’

**³The ox knows its owner,
and the donkey its master’s crib;
but Israel does not know,
my people do not understand.**

**⁴Ah, sinful nation,
people laden with iniquity,
offspring who do evil,
children who deal corruptly,
who have forsaken YHWH,
who have despised the Holy One of Israel.
*[They have fallen away.]***

‘Sin’ (ḥāṭā) will recur in verses eighteen and twenty-eight and a further ten times in the Isaiah scroll. “iniquity” (‘āwōn) will recur 24 times. Both words speak of the exact opposite of holiness, the quality that should characterise the people of the ‘Holy One of Israel’ – an expression found in the post-exilic temple liturgy:

I will also praise you with the harp for your faithfulness, O my God;
I will sing praises to you with the lyre, O Holy One of Israel.

– Psalm 71:22

They tested God again and again, and provoked the Holy One of Israel.

– Psalm 78:41

Our shield belongs to YHWH, our king to the Holy One of Israel.

– Psalm 89:18

**⁵Why do you seek further beatings?
Why do you continue to rebel?
The whole head is sick,
and the whole heart faint.**

**⁶From the sole of the foot even to the head,
there is no soundness in it,
but bruises and sores
and bleeding wounds;
they have not been drained, or bound up,
or softened with oil.**

**⁷Your country lies desolate,
your cities are burned with fire;
in your very presence aliens devour your land;
it is desolate, as overthrown by foreigners.**

The ‘foreigners’ may be those who were imported in 701 into the towns of Judah by Sennacherib from Philistia, according to the Assyrian custom of mixing up populations to make resistance difficult.

Cult is no substitute for justice

**⁸And daughter Zion is left
like a booth in a vineyard,
like a shelter in a cucumber field,
like a besieged city.**

**⁹If YHWH of hosts
had not left us a few survivors,
we would have been like Sodom,
and become like Gomorrah.**

The poet has been using the image of a sick body to describe the sick situation in Judah. Only Jerusalem ('Daughter Zion') is left standing, and it is like a temporary lean-to in a vineyard. It could collapse at any time. He sees this as God's 'punishment' for their infidelity. They could have been left utterly destroyed, like Sodom and Gomorrah (see Genesis 19:24). As noted earlier the situation best described by these words is that of Judah in 701BC. One can imagine how these words might have been read by the 'few survivors' of the destruction of Jerusalem in 597.

**¹⁰Hear the word of YHWH,
you rulers of Sodom!
Listen to the teaching of our God,
you people of Gomorrah!**

The critique now becomes sharper. It is directed at the whole people, but especially the political and religious leaders. The word translated 'teaching' here is *tôrâ*. Is this a sarcastic reference to the aspects of the torah stressed by the priests? Is the prophet telling the priests that the problem is one of social injustice, not failure to follow the rubrics of the cult?

**¹¹What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices?
says YHWH;
I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams
and the *suet* of *fattened* beasts;
I do not delight in the blood of bulls,
or of lambs, or of goats.**

**¹²When you come to appear before me,
who asked this from your hand?
Trample my courts no more;**

**¹³bringing offerings is futile;
incense is an abomination to me.
New moon and sabbath and calling of convocation—
I cannot endure solemn assemblies with iniquity.**

**¹⁴Your new moons and your appointed festivals
my soul hates;
they have become a burden to me,
I am weary of bearing them.**

Isaiah is not alone in declaring that religious cult is no substitute for justice. It is no place to try to hide from God. Listen to Isaiah's contemporaries:

I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.
Though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them;
and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals I will not look upon.
Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to your harps.
But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an everflowing stream.

– Amos 5:21-24

With what shall I come before YHWH, and bow myself before God on high?
Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old?
Will YHWH be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil?
Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression,
the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?"
He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does YHWH require of you
but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

– Micah 6:6-8

**¹⁵When you stretch out your hands,
I will hide my eyes from you;
even though you make many prayers,
I will not listen;
your hands are full of blood.**

¹⁶Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean;

The words 'make yourselves clean' are a call for interior purification:

All in vain I have kept my heart clean.

– Psalm 73:13

What are mortals, that they can be clean?
Or those born of woman, that they can be righteous?

– Job 15:14

Who can say, "I have made my heart clean; I am pure from my sin"?

– Proverbs 20:9

This essential purification is made evident in social justice, as the following verses declare.

**remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes;
cease to do evil,
¹⁷learn to do good;
seek justice, rescue the oppressed,
defend the orphan, plead for the widow.**

We recall Jesus' judgment:

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, you hypocrites. You pay tithes of mint and dill and cummin, and have neglected the weightier things of the law: right judgment, mercy and fidelity.

– Matthew 23:23

Conduct must change

**¹⁸Come now, let us argue it out, says YHWH:
Though your sins are like scarlet,
they could become like snow.
Though they are red like crimson,
they could become white like wool?**

Verse eighteen could also be translated: ‘If your sins are like scarlet, shall they be like snow? If they are red like crimson, shall they become like wool?’ This highlights the seriousness of their sins. The chosen translation puts the accent on what could happen if they really changed their conduct.

**¹⁹If you are willing and obedient,
you shall eat the good of the land;
²⁰but if you refuse and rebel,
you shall be devoured by the sword;
for the mouth of YHWH has spoken.**

We might compare:

Though you wash yourself with lye and use much soap
the stain of your guilt is still before me, says YHWH.

– Jeremiah 2:22

We cannot sin as though it has no consequences. We might try to pretend, but there is no way that God can. Verses twenty-one to twenty-three is the indictment, and it is followed by the verdict in verse twenty-four.

**²¹How the faithful city has become a whore!
She that was full of justice,
righteousness lodged in her—
but now murderers!
²²Your silver has become dross,
your wine is mixed with water.
²³Your princes are rebels
and companions of thieves.
Everyone loves a bribe
and runs after gifts.
They do not defend the orphan,
and the widow’s cause does not come before them.
²⁴Therefore says the Sovereign, YHWH of hosts,
the Mighty One of Israel:
Ah, I will pour out my wrath on my enemies,
and avenge myself on my foes!**

The subversion of justice, especially by the taking of bribes is another theme that we find in Isaiah’s contemporaries:

They hate the one who reproves in the gate; they abhor the one who speaks the truth.
For I know how many are your transgressions, and how great are your sins—
you who afflict the righteous, who take a bribe, and push aside the needy in the gate.

– Amos 5:10, 12

Hear this, you rulers of the house of Jacob and chiefs of the house of Israel,
 who abhor justice and pervert all equity,
 Its rulers give judgment for a bribe, its priests teach for a price,
 its prophets give oracles for money; yet they lean upon YHWH and say,
 “Surely YHWH is with us! No harm shall come upon us.”

– Micah 3:9, 11

YHWH’s ‘punishment’ is in view of purification. It must issue in the restoration of a just political and judicial order.

**²⁵I will turn my hand against you;
 I will smelt away your dross as with lye
 and remove all your alloy.
²⁶And I will restore your judges as at the first,
 and your counselors as at the beginning.
 Afterward you shall be called the city of righteousness,
 the faithful city.**

The ‘faithful city’ that became a whore because of injustice (1:21) will once again be a place where justice prevails, ‘a faithful city’. This YHWH will do.

**²⁷Zion shall be redeemed by justice,
 and those in her who repent, by righteousness.
²⁸But rebels and sinners shall be destroyed together,
 and those who forsake YHWH shall be consumed.**

Verses 27 to 28 belong to the final editorial stages of the Isaiah scroll, and are a comment on all that has been said to this point. They are a good example of the kind of remodeling of the Isaian tradition in post-exilic Judah. The focus is no longer on present critique but on future judgment. It is not always easy to discern who is truly penitent and who is obdurate, but there will come a time when all will be made clear. The penitent will be vindicated and the obdurate will have to face their punishment. God’s judgment will vindicate the repentant. Those who do not repent ‘will be destroyed’.

The chapter is rounded off with a statement that could come from Isaiah himself, or it could, perhaps, be an extension of Isaiah’s critique from a later period.

**²⁹For you shall be ashamed of the oaks
 in which you delighted;
 and you shall blush for the gardens
 that you have chosen.
³⁰For you shall be like an oak whose leaf withers,
 and like a garden without water.
³¹The strong shall become like tinder,
 and their work like a spark;
 they and their work shall burn together,
 with no one to quench them.**

A future full of hope

Title (2:1)

¹The word that Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem.

This appears to be a title originally intended perhaps for chapters two to twelve, before chapter one was added.

Introduction to 2:2 – 4:6

The central core of this section (2:5 – 4:1) threatens judgment. It is introduced (2:2-4) by words that appear to be composed after the judgment has come (after the destruction of Jerusalem in 586, and the exile), and in circumstances (the return to Judah) that open up a new perspective on the future. It concludes (4:2-6) in a similar way. The post-exilic editors have thus bracketed Isaiah's words in such a way as to challenge their contemporaries to learn from the mistakes of the past, but also to take up the mission to the world that YHWH has given them by bringing them back to Judah and rebuilding the temple.

Isaiah 2:2-4 (see Micah 4:1-3)

²In days to come

**the mountain of YHWH's house
shall be established as the highest of the mountains,
and shall be raised above the hills;
all the nations shall stream to it.**

**³Many peoples shall come and say,
"Come, let us go up to the mountain of YHWH,
to the house of the God of Jacob;
that he may teach us his ways
and that we may walk in his paths."**

**For out of Zion shall go forth instruction,
and the word of YHWH from Jerusalem.**

**⁴He shall judge between the nations,
and shall arbitrate for many peoples;
they shall beat their swords into plowshares,
and their spears into pruning hooks;
nation shall not *take up the sword* against nation,
neither shall they learn *to make war* any more.**

In composing 2:2-4, the post-exilic members of what we are calling the 'Isaiah School' have drawn on themes that recur throughout the Isaiah scroll.

1. Jerusalem as the cosmic mountain at the centre of the world

They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain;
for the earth will be full of the knowledge of YHWH as the waters cover the sea.

– Isaiah 11:9

On this mountain YHWH of hosts will make for all peoples
a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines,
of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear.

– Isaiah 25:6

You shall have a song as in the night when a holy festival is kept;
and gladness of heart, as when one sets out to the sound of the flute
to go to the mountain of YHWH, to the Rock of Israel.

– Isaiah 30:29

From Jerusalem a remnant shall go out, and from Mount Zion a band of survivors.
The zeal of YHWH of hosts will do this.

– Isaiah 37:32

Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings;
lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings,
lift it up, do not fear; say to the cities of Judah, “Here is your God!”

– Isaiah 40:9

Whoever takes refuge in me shall possess the land
and inherit my holy mountain.

– Isaiah 57:13

They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain, says YHWH.

– Isaiah 65:25

2. YHWH’s dwelling in Jerusalem

Then YHWH will create over the whole site of Mount Zion and over its places of assembly a cloud by day and smoke and the shining of a flaming fire by night. Indeed over all the glory there will be a canopy.

– Isaiah 4:5

YHWH of hosts, who dwells on Mount Zion.

– Isaiah 8:18

Mount Zion, the place of the name of YHWH of hosts.

– Isaiah 18:7

Then the moon will be abashed, and the sun ashamed;
for YHWH of hosts will reign on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem,
and before his elders he will manifest his glory.

– Isaiah 24:23

3. Mission to the nations

Thus says YHWH:

The wealth of Egypt and the merchandise of Ethiopia,
and the Sabean, tall of stature,
shall come over to you and be yours,
they shall follow you;
they shall come over in chains and bow down to you.

They will make supplication to you, saying,
“God is with you alone, and there is no other;
there is no god besides him.” ...

Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth!
For I am God, and there is no other.

By myself I have sworn,
from my mouth has gone forth in righteousness
a word that shall not return:
“To me every knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear.”

– Isaiah 45:14, 22-23

Mission to the nations

These foreigners I will bring to my holy mountain,
and make them joyful in my house of prayer;
their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar;
for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.

– Isaiah 56:7

Nations shall come to your light,
and kings to the brightness of your dawn.
Lift up your eyes and look around;
they all gather together, they come to you;
your sons shall come from far away,
and your daughters shall be carried on their nurses' arms.
Then you shall see and be radiant;
your heart shall thrill and rejoice,
because the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you,
the wealth of the nations shall come to you.
A multitude of camels shall cover you,
the young camels of Midian and Ephah;
all those from Sheba shall come.
They shall bring gold and frankincense,
and shall proclaim the praise of YHWH.
All the flocks of Kedar shall be gathered to you,
the rams of Nebaioth shall minister to you;
they shall be acceptable on my altar,
and I will glorify my glorious house.

– Isaiah 60:3-7

The post-exilic prophet, Zechariah, has a similar message:

Many peoples and strong nations shall come to seek YHWH of hosts in Jerusalem
and to entreat the favour of YHWH. This says YHWH of hosts:
In those days ten men from nations of every language shall take hold of a Jew,
grasping his garment and saying, "Let us go with you,
for we have heard that God is with you."

– Zechariah 8:22-23

4. Moral instruction (tôrâ, 2:3) radiating out from Jerusalem is a post-exilic Isaiah theme:

Listen to me, my people, and give heed to me, my nation;
for a teaching [tôrâ] will go out from me,
and my justice for a light to the peoples.

– Isaiah 51:4

The contrast between 2:2-4 and the rest of chapter two could not be more striking. We have heard that the mountain of YHWH's house will be exalted; we will hear that the mountains of human arrogance will be brought down. We have heard that the nations will flow to YHWH's mountain to learn of God and to walk in God's ways; we are about to hear that Jerusalem is full of foreigners and soothsayers who worship their own inventions. We have heard that the nations will reject weapons of violence; we are about to hear that the rulers of Jerusalem are pursuing trade in horses and chariots. We have heard that peace and harmony will be the result of YHWH's reign; we are about to hear of the terror, fear and humiliation that is rife in Judah.

Introduction to Isaiah 2:5 – 4:1

By introducing this section with 2:1-4 and concluding it with 4:2-6, the organisers of the Isaiah scroll intend this section to be read as one piece. It is made up of three sections in which the Prophet describes the appalling situation of Judah and Jerusalem (2:6-9; 3:1-9; 3:12-15). This calls forth divine judgment (2:11; 3:16 – 4:1), but also urgent pleas for a change of heart and behaviour (2:5-6; 2:9-10; 2:22; 3:10-11). Some verses seem to be comments added by the editors. There is an unusually high proportion of words that are found only once in the Hebrew Bible (which at times introduces some guesswork into the translation). One of the sections (2:11-21) is the worst preserved section in the Isaiah scroll.

With all that, the situation described and denounced by Isaiah could fit well into the last years of Uzziah's life, perhaps during the regency of his son, Jotham (749-734). Uzziah had captured the port of Elat on the Red Sea (2Kings 14:22), and the Philistine cities on the Mediterranean (2Chronicles 26:6-15). Both of these victories opened Judah to sea trade (see the reference to the ships of Tarshish, 2:16). Foreign trade exposed the people of Judah to foreign cults.

If this is, indeed, the situation that Isaiah is addressing, we are in touch with some of his early preaching. Could this be why the compilers have placed this section prior to Isaiah 6:1 which refers to 'the year that King Uzziah died'?

Some of the statements could also apply to the period of Ahaz's reign (c. 734-727). Once he had survived the threat from Syria and Israel (734-732), Ahaz accepted to be a vassal state of Assyria. This involved constructing an Assyrian altar in Jerusalem and honouring the Assyrian gods (2Kings 16:10-16). Some parts of the passage seem to fit best with the situation in Jerusalem after Sennacherib had devastated Judah (701). It is not difficult to imagine Isaiah himself repeating his favourite themes and reapplying his critique to changing circumstances.

Exhortation 1 (2:5-6)

**⁵O house of Jacob,
come, let us walk *into* YHWH's light!
⁶For you have forsaken your people,
O house of Jacob.**

I am taking it that when Isaiah addresses the 'house of Jacob' it is especially the *royal* house that he has in his sights. Isaiah is accusing them of having forsaken the people whom they are meant to serve. Isaiah is calling them to walk into YHWH's light, so that they will see how they ought to behave as leaders of YHWH's people. He is summoning them to repentance.

Description 1 (2:6-9; compare Micah 5:10-14)

**⁶Indeed they are full of diviners from the east
and of soothsayers like the Philistines,
and they clasp hands with foreigners.**

**⁷Their land is filled with silver and gold,
and there is no end to their treasures;
their land is filled with horses,
and there is no end to their chariots.**

**⁸Their land is filled with idols;
they bow down to the work of their hands,
to what their own fingers have made.**

**⁹And so people are humbled,
and everyone is brought low.**

Isaiah describes a long-standing situation of military rule, and foreign presence, wealth and cult of foreign ‘gods’. Jerusalem is wealthy, but ‘they bow down to the work of their hands’(2:8) and ‘people are humbled, and everyone is brought low’(2:9). Increased contact with trade from east and west has brought wealth (see 2:7), but it has also brought them into contact with foreign superstitions. Instead of listening to YHWH, they are listening to diviners and soothsayers (see 2:6), something that corrodes the very foundations of Yahwism.

Although these nations that you are about to dispossess do give heed to soothsayers and diviners, as for you, YHWH your God does not permit you to do so.

– Deuteronomy 18:14

Prosperity has brought in its train the worship of idols. Instead of fidelity to the covenant, with its demands of care for one’s neighbour, self-interest has the rich ‘bowing down to the work of their own hands’(2:8), with the consequence that ‘everyone is brought low’(2:9).

Exhortation 2 (2:9-10)

**Do not raise your eyes to them! ¹⁰Go to the Rock,
and stay hidden in the dust in terror of YHWH,
and of the glory of his majesty.**

They must desist from the folly of bowing before and looking up to these false gods. YHWH, ‘the Mighty One of Jacob, the Shepherd, the Rock of Israel’(Genesis 49:24), is their security.

Jacob abandoned God who made him,
and scoffed at the Rock of his salvation ...
You were unmindful of the Rock that bore you;
you forgot the God who gave you birth.

– Deuteronomy 32:15, 18

There is no Holy One like YHWH, no one besides you; there is no Rock like our God.

– 1Samuel 2:2

YHWH is my rock, my fortress, and my deliverer, my God, my rock in whom I take refuge, my shield, and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold.

– Psalm 18:2

They have done wrong, and must humble themselves before YHWH seeking pardon. The ‘gods’ that human beings make can do nothing for us. Their God is YHWH, lord of creation and lord of history. If they fail to heed his voice and if they continue to heap up injustices, of course they should live in dread of the ‘terror’(paḥad) of YHWH’, for YHWH, the one who redeems from slavery, will not stand idly by while the leaders follow policies that bring about the enslavement of YHWH’s people. If, however, they repent, things will be different:

Do not fear, or be afraid; have I not told you from of old and declared it?
 You are my witnesses! Is there any god besides me?
 There is no other rock; I know not one.

– Isaiah 44:8

Judgment (2:11-21)

*¹¹The haughtiness of people shall be humbled,
 and the pride of everyone shall be brought low;
 and YHWH alone will be exalted on that day.*

**¹²For YHWH of hosts has a day
 against all that is proud and lofty,
 against all that is lifted up and high;**

The ‘day’ of YHWH was expected to be a day when YHWH would intervene decisively to overthrow Israel’s adversaries. Isaiah speaks of it as a day when YHWH will judge Israel. Likewise, Amos:

Alas for you who desire the day of YHWH!
 Why do you want the day of YHWH?
 It is darkness, not light;
 as if someone fled from a lion,
 and was met by a bear;
 or went into the house and rested a hand against the wall,
 and was bitten by a snake.
 Is not the day of YHWH darkness, not light,
 and gloom with no brightness in it?

– Amos 5:18-20

**¹³against all the cedars of Lebanon,
 lofty and lifted up;
 and against all the oaks of Bashan;**

**¹⁴against all the high mountains,
 and against all the lofty hills;**

**¹⁵against every high tower,
 and against every fortified wall;**

**¹⁶against all the ships of Tarshish,
 and against all the beautiful craft.**

*¹⁷The haughtiness of people shall be humbled,
 and the pride of everyone shall be brought low;
 and YHWH alone will be exalted on that day.*

¹⁸The idols shall utterly pass away.

YHWH's judgment

¹⁹**They will go into the caves in the rocks
and into holes in the earth,
in terror of YHWH,
and of the glory of his majesty,
when he rises to cause the earth to quake.**

²⁰**On that day people will throw away
to the moles and to the bats
their idols of silver and their idols of gold,
which they made for themselves to worship.**

²¹**They will go into the caves in the rocks
and into holes in the earth,
in terror of YHWH,
and of the glory of his majesty,
when he rises to cause the earth to quake.**

If they do not 'go to the Rock'(2:10) they will find themselves fleeing to the rocks (the refrain, 2:19, 21) in a vain attempt to hide from YHWH's judgment.

Paul, too, speaks of the punishment suffered by those who cause oppression:

When YHWH Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance upon those who do not acknowledge God and upon those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus, they shall suffer the punishment of eternal destruction and exclusion from the presence of YHWH and from his mighty glory.

– 2Thessalonians 1:7-9 (Compare Apocalypse 6:15)

Exhortation 3 (2:22)

²²**Turn away from man in whose nostrils is breath, for what is it worth?**

Description 2: Deportation and Consequent Anarchy (3:1-9)

¹**For now the Sovereign, YHWH of hosts,
is taking away from Jerusalem and from Judah
support and staff**

[all support of bread, and all support of water - a gloss?]

²**warrior and soldier,
judge and prophet, diviner and elder,**

³**captain of fifty and dignitary,
counsellor and skillful magician and expert enchanter.**

This list seems to describe the kinds of people that were deported by the Assyrians after a military expedition. Is Isaiah referring to the situation after the devastation of Judah in 701 by Sennacherib? He goes on to describe the anarchy that follows on the deportation of the leading citizens.

⁴**And I will make boys their princes,
and babes shall rule over them.**

⁵**The people will be oppressed,
one by another and everyone by a neighbour.**

- ⁵the youth will be insolent to the elder,
and the base to the honourable.
- ⁶Someone will even seize a relative,
a member of the clan, saying,
“You have a cloak;
you shall be our leader,
and this heap of ruins
shall be under your rule.”
- ⁷But the other will cry out on that day, saying,
“I will not be a healer; in my house there is neither bread nor cloak;
you shall not make me leader of the people.”
- ⁸For Jerusalem has stumbled
and Judah has fallen,
because their speech and their deeds are against YHWH,
defying his glorious presence.
- ⁹The look on their faces bears witness against them;
they proclaim their sin like Sodom,
they do not hide it.
- Woe to them!
For they have brought evil on themselves.

Exhortation 4 (3:10-11)

- ¹⁰Say: *How good things are for the just*
for he will feed on the fruit of his deeds;
- ¹¹woe to the unjust, it will go ill with him,
for he will be treated as his actions deserve.

Third description: the powerful exploit the poor (3:12-15)

- ¹²My people—children are their oppressors,
and women rule over them.
O my people, your leaders mislead you,
and confuse the course of your paths.
- ¹³YHWH rises to argue his case;
he stands to judge the peoples.
- ¹⁴YHWH enters into judgment
with the elders and princes of his people:
It is you who have devoured the vineyard;
the spoil of the poor is in your houses.
- ¹⁵What do you mean by crushing my people,
by grinding the face of the poor? says the Lord YHWH of hosts.

This indictment of social injustice goes to the heart of Israel’s identity as the people of YHWH, the one who hears the cry of the poor. Let us listen to Isaiah’s contemporaries.

Social Injustice

Thus says YHWH:

For three transgressions of Israel,
and for four, I will not revoke the punishment;
because they sell the righteous for silver,
and the needy for a pair of sandals—
they who trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth,
and push the afflicted out of the way;
father and son go in to the same girl,
so that my holy name is profaned;
they lay themselves down beside every altar
on garments taken in pledge;
and in the house of their God they drink
wine bought with fines they imposed.

– Amos 2:6-8

Alas for those who lie on beds of ivory,
and lounge on their couches,
and eat lambs from the flock,
and calves from the stall;
who sing idle songs to the sound of the harp,
and like David improvise on instruments of music;
who drink wine from bowls,
and anoint themselves with the finest oils,
but are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph!
Therefore they shall now be the first to go into exile,
and the revelry of the loungers shall pass away.

– Amos 6:4-7

Hear this, you that trample on the needy,
and bring to ruin the poor of the land,
saying, “When will the new moon be over
so that we may sell grain;
and the sabbath,
so that we may offer wheat for sale?
We will make the ephah small and the shekel great,
and practice deceit with false balances,
buying the poor for silver
and the needy for a pair of sandals,
and selling the sweepings of the wheat.”

– Amos 8:4-6

Alas for those who devise wickedness
and evil deeds on their beds!
When the morning dawns, they perform it,
because it is in their power.
They covet fields, and seize them;
houses, and take them away;
they oppress householder and house,
people and their inheritance.

– Micah 2:1-2

And I said:

Listen, you heads of Jacob
 and rulers of the house of Israel!
 Should you not know justice?—
 you who hate the good and love the evil,
 who tear the skin off my people,
 and the flesh off their bones;
 who eat the flesh of my people,
 flay their skin off them,
 break their bones in pieces,
 and chop them up like meat in a kettle,
 like flesh in a caldron.
 Then they will cry to YHWH,
 but he will not answer them;
 he will hide his face from them at that time,
 because they have acted wickedly.

– Micah 3:1-4

Hear this, you rulers of the house of Jacob
 and chiefs of the house of Israel,
 who abhor justice
 and pervert all equity,
 who build Zion with blood
 and Jerusalem with wrong!
 Its rulers give judgment for a bribe,
 its priests teach for a price,
 its prophets give oracles for money;
 yet they lean upon YHWH and say,
 “Surely YHWH is with us!
 No harm shall come upon us.”
 Therefore because of you
 Zion shall be plowed as a field;
 Jerusalem shall become a heap of ruins,
 and the mountain of the house a wooded height.

– Micah 3:9-12

Judgment (3:16 – 4:1)

Is Isaiah using spoiled daughters flaunting their ill-gotten wealth as a metaphor for the rebellious towns of Judah? They will be brought so low that they will be desperately looking for security from anyone who will support them (4:1) – to no avail.

¹⁶YHWH said:

**Because the daughters of Zion are haughty
 and walk with outstretched necks,
 glancing wantonly with their eyes,
 mincing along as they go,
 tinkling with their feet;**

¹⁷**the Lord will afflict with scabs
 the heads of the daughters of Zion,
 and YHWH will lay bare their secret parts.**

¹⁸In that day the Lord will take away the finery of the anklets, the headbands, and the crescents; ¹⁹the pendants, the bracelets, and the scarfs; ²⁰the headdresses, the armlets, the sashes, the perfume boxes, and the amulets; ²¹the signet rings and nose rings; ²²the festal robes, the mantles, the cloaks, and the handbags; ²³the garments of gauze, the linen garments, the turbans, and the veils.

**²⁴Instead of perfume there will be a stench;
and instead of a sash, a rope;
and instead of well-set hair, baldness;
and instead of a rich robe, a binding of sackcloth;
instead of beauty, shame.**

**²⁵Your men shall fall by the sword
and your warriors in battle.**

**²⁶And her gates shall lament and mourn;
ravaged, she shall sit upon the ground.**

**^{4:1}Seven women shall take hold of one man in that day, saying,
“We will eat our own bread and wear our own clothes;
just let us be called by your name; take away our disgrace.”**

Oracle of Salvation (4:2-6)

Like 2:1-4, this is written from a post-exilic perspective. Isaiah's dire warnings went unheeded. Jerusalem was destroyed in 586BC and its leading citizens were deported to Babylon. With Babylon's capitulation to Cyrus of Persia, a remnant returned to Judah to rebuild the city and the temple. The worst is over. The shadow of the past hangs over them, and its lessons must not be forgotten, but YHWH's fidelity to his people has opened up for them a new future. Because of the obvious political weakness of Judah, now part of the western province of the vast Persian Empire, those who wanted to inspire hope for a glorious future looked towards YHWH's intervention, the way they understood him to have intervened to 'miraculously' restore them to Judah against all the odds.

²On that day the *shoot* that YHWH has planted shall be beautiful and glorious, and the fruit of the land shall be the pride and glory of the survivors of Israel.

Jeremiah and Ezekiel use the word 'shoot' in reference to the scion of the Davidic line who carried the hope of eventual restoration (see Jeremiah 23:5; 33:15-16; Ezekiel 29:21). Zechariah uses it of Zerubbabel, the governor of Judah and grandson of the exiled king, Jehoiachin (Zechariah 3:8; 6:12; see Psalm 132:17). The authors of the Isaiah School, however, are referring more broadly to the renewed growth of restored Judah (see also Isaiah 61:11). The Aramaic Targum translates 'shoot' (šemaḥ) as mešīaḥ ('messiah').

³Whoever is left in Zion and remains in Jerusalem will be called holy, everyone who has been recorded for life in Jerusalem,

After the exile, a census was taken of the citizens of Jerusalem for the temple records (see Ezra 2:62; 8:1,3; Nehemiah 12:22-23). Here in Isaiah, the image of a record was used metaphorically to refer to those who truly belong to YHWH.

Those who revered YHWH spoke with one another. YHWH took note and listened, and a book of remembrance was written before him of those who revered YHWH and thought on his name. They shall be mine, says YHWH of hosts, my special possession on the day when I act, and I will spare them as parents spare their children who serve them. Then once more you shall see the difference between the righteous and the wicked, between one who serves God and one who does not serve him.

– Malachi 3:16-18

Let them be blotted out of the book of the living;
let them not be enrolled among the righteous.

– Psalm 69:28

⁴once YHWH has washed away the filth of the daughters of Zion and cleansed the bloodstains of Jerusalem from its midst by a spirit of judgment and by a spirit of burning.

This picks up the language used by Isaiah 3:16 in referring to the towns of Judah. Judgment by wind and fire is another link with the final chapters of the Isaiah scroll (see Isaiah 66:15-16).

⁵Then YHWH will create over the whole site of Mount Zion and over its places of assembly a cloud by day and smoke and the shining of a flaming fire by night. Indeed over all the glory there will be a canopy. ⁶It will serve as a pavilion, a shade by day from the heat, and a refuge and a shelter from the storm and rain.

It is significant that the verb ‘create’ (bārâ) is used. God replaces chaos with order. He will be among them protecting them, as he was among his people in the wilderness:

YHWH went in front of them in a pillar of cloud by day, to lead them along the way, and in a pillar of fire by night, to give them light.

– Exodus 13:21

The sign of God’s protective presence is no longer confined to the temple. It covers the whole mountain and the whole assembly. This is carried over into the New Testament:

I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb. The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it. Its gates will never be shut by day—and there will be no night there. People will bring into it the glory and the honour of the nations. But nothing unclean will enter it, nor anyone who practices abomination or falsehood, but only those who are written in the Lamb’s book of life.

– Revelation 21:22-27

Introduction to Isaiah 5

Chapter five functions as a prologue to chapters six to twelve. It begins with an accusation sung by a friend of someone who is a cheated lover. Following an ancient literary convention, the vineyard is used as a metaphor for the female body.

Catch us the foxes, the little foxes,
that ruin the vineyards — for our vineyards are in blossom.
– Song of Songs 2:15

Awake, O north wind, and come, O south wind!
Blow upon my garden that its fragrance may be wafted abroad.
Let my beloved come to his garden, and eat its choicest fruits.
– Song of Songs 4:16

My vineyard, my very own, is for myself
– Song of Songs 8:12

The owner of the vineyard is a ‘dear friend’ (yādīd) of the singer. The owner’s beloved is Israel, his vineyard (see 1:8, 3:14).

**¹Let me sing for my *dear friend*
my love-song concerning his vineyard:
My *dear friend* had a vineyard
on a very fertile hill.
²He dug it and cleared it of stones,
and planted it with choice vines;
he built a watchtower in the midst of it,
and hewed out a wine vat in it;
he expected it to yield grapes,
but it yielded *bitter* grapes.**

The song ends and the owner of the vineyard speaks:

**³And now, inhabitants of Jerusalem
and people of Judah,
judge between me
and my vineyard.
⁴What more was there to do for my vineyard
that I have not done in it?
When I expected it to yield grapes,
why did it yield bitter grapes?

⁵And now I will tell you
what I will do to my vineyard.
I will remove its hedge,
and it shall be devoured;
I will break down its wall,
and it shall be trampled down.**

**6I will make it a waste;
it shall not be pruned or hoed,
and it shall be overgrown with briars and thorns;
I will also command the clouds
that they rain no rain upon it.**

The ‘punishment’ of the ‘vineyard’ is in the language of the ‘curses’ attached to treaties:

You shall build a house, but not live in it. You shall plant a vineyard, but not enjoy its fruit ... You shall plant vineyards and dress them, but you shall neither drink the wine nor gather the grapes, for the worm shall eat them.

– Deuteronomy 28:30, 39

Therefore because you trample on the poor
and take from them levies of grain,
you have built houses of hewn stone,
but you shall not live in them;
you have planted pleasant vineyards,
but you shall not drink their wine.

– Amos 5:11

Their wealth shall be plundered,
and their houses laid waste.
Though they build houses,
they shall not inhabit them;
though they plant vineyards,
they shall not drink wine from them.

– Zephaniah 1:13

Jeremiah uses the same image:

Many shepherds have destroyed my vineyard,
they have trampled down my portion,
they have made my pleasant portion
a desolate wilderness.

– Jeremiah 12:10

**7For the vineyard of YHWH of hosts
is the house of Israel,
and the people of Judah
are his pleasant planting;
he expected justice,
but saw a cover up;
righteousness,
but heard a cry!**

‘Cover up’ seems a better translation than ‘bloodshed’ The Hebrew word occurs only here. A related verb means ‘to make scabby’. Isaiah is particularly strident in his condemnation of injustice that has the appearance of being just. The words used look and sound almost the same, but are in fact just the opposite. ‘Justice’ is מִשְׁפָּט (mišpāt); ‘cover up’ is מִסְפָּח (mišpāḥ). ‘Righteousness’ is דִּקְדָּא (ṣēdāqâ); ‘cry’ is אֶבְיָח (ṣē‘āqâ).

We might compare Jesus’ parable (Mark 12:1-9).

Woe Oracles (Isaiah 5:8-25)

Hans Wildberger in his commentary on Isaiah 1–12 (A Continental Commentary; Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press 1991, page 216-217) writes:

The broad range of Isaiah's interests are mirrored in the collection of woe-oracles. The disastrous economic development, which led to the degradation of the weaker members of society, reducing them to the level of outcasts, roused him to indignation, just as did the failure of the officials who were responsible for preserving justice. He saw the frivolous nature of those who wanted to live a pleasure-filled life, to the accompaniment of wine and music. He was shocked by the arrogance of the mockers and the self-conceit of the wise. He was most deeply upset that there were leaders, in responsible positions, who misused their abilities by changing the laws in a way which would benefit them ... Human pride is the mainspring of this anti-social behaviour ... Isaiah uses the covenant and wisdom traditions ... However, Israel's sins were not simply disregard for the letter of the law or the teachings of wisdom; and they were not due to a lack of social sensitivity or to failing to recognise that there is danger inherent in the dolce vita. Rather, Israel's sins were rooted in its pride which caused it to fail to see the plan and action of the Holy One of Israel and to take it to heart ... Isaiah is a passionate theologian, continually speaking about the obligations Israel has towards its God. He is not merely announcing the consequences of a way of life which goes against established order. He is speaking about the intervention of the Holy One of Israel who executes his function of judging with righteousness ... Indeed 'they have rejected the instruction of YHWH of hosts, and have despised the word of the Holy One of Israel' (5:24).

Economic Injustice (Isaiah 5:8-19)

**⁸Ah, you who join house to house,
who add field to field,
until there is room for no one but you,
and you are left to live alone
in the midst of the land!**

Compare Amos, especially 4:1-3; 6:1-7; 8:4-8. Concerning extensive properties held at the expense of the poor, see Micah 2:1-5 and 5:1-13. Concerning palatial homes built on what has been taken from the poor, see Amos 3:9-12; Habakkuk 2:9-14 and Jeremiah 22:13-19.

**⁹YHWH of hosts has sworn in my hearing:
Surely many houses shall be desolate,
large and beautiful houses, without inhabitant.**

**¹⁰For ten acres of vineyard shall yield but one bath,
and a homer of seed shall yield a mere ephah.**

'Acre' translates šemed, which literally means 'yoke of oxen'. Ten acres' refers to an area which two animals working as a team can plough in a day. A 'bath' is 30 litres. A 'homer' is a donkey-load, and an ephah is one-tenth of a homer. The harvest is only a tenth of the seed sown.

**¹¹Ah, you who rise early in the morning
in pursuit of strong drink,
who linger in the evening
to be inflamed by wine,**

Morning is the time, before work begins in the fields, when court cases are heard in the town square. Instead of pursuing justice, they pursue luxury, and at the expense of the poor who are denied justice. In the New Testament, compare the words of James:

The wages you withheld from the workers who harvested your fields are crying aloud,
and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of YHWH of hosts.

– James 5:4

Excessive drinking is criticised by Isaiah’s contemporaries:

Hear this word, you cows of Bashan
who are on Mount Samaria,
who oppress the poor, who crush the needy,
who say to their husbands, “Bring something to drink!”

– Amos 4:1

On the day of our king the officials
became sick with the heat of wine;
he stretched out his hand with mockers.

– Hosea 7:5

If someone were to go about uttering empty falsehoods,
saying, “I will preach to you of wine and strong drink,”
such a one would be the preacher for this people!

– Micah 2:11

**¹²whose feasts consist of lyre and harp,
tambourine and flute and wine,
but who do not regard the deeds of YHWH,
or see the work of his hands!**

Similar language is used by Amos:

Alas for those who are at ease in Zion,
and for those who feel secure on Mount Samaria,
the notables of the first of the nations,
to whom the house of Israel resorts! ...
Alas for those who lie on beds of ivory,
and lounge on their couches,
and eat lambs from the flock,
and calves from the stall;
who sing idle songs to the sound of the harp,
and like David improvise on instruments of music;
who drink wine from bowls,
and anoint themselves with the finest oils,
but are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph!
Therefore they shall now be the first to go into exile,
and the revelry of the loungers shall pass away.

– Amos 6:1-7

In the New Testament compare the words of Jesus:

Beware that your hearts do not become drowsy from carousing and drunkenness
and the anxieties of daily life.

– Luke 21:34

Threat of Exile

¹³Therefore my people go into exile without knowledge;

Exile is a regular threat because when Assyria conquered a territory it was their practice to deport the leading citizens, as well as anyone useful for their war effort. It happened to the people of Israel in Transjordan and in Israel. It happened in Judah in 701 and again under the Babylonians in 597 and again in 586. Amos makes the same threat again and again in chapters 1-2, as well as in the following:

The Lord YHWH has sworn by his holiness:

The time is surely coming upon you,
when they shall take you away with hooks,
even the last of you with fishhooks.

Through breaches in the wall you shall leave,
each one straight ahead;
and you shall be flung out into Harmon, says YHWH.

Come to Bethel—and transgress;
to Gilgal—and multiply transgression;
bring your sacrifices every morning,
your tithes every three days;
bring a thank-offering of leavened bread,
and proclaim freewill offerings, publish them;
for so you love to do, O people of Israel! says the Lord YHWH.

I gave you cleanness of teeth in all your cities,
and lack of bread in all your places,
yet you did not return to me, says YHWH

— Amos 4:2-6

Therefore they shall now be the first to go into exile,
and the revelry of the loungers shall pass away.

— Amos 6:7

**their nobles are dying of hunger,
and their multitude is parched with thirst.**

**¹⁴Therefore Sheol has enlarged its appetite
and opened its mouth beyond measure;
the nobility of Jerusalem and her multitude go down,
her throng and all who exult in her.**

**¹⁵People are bowed down, everyone is brought low,
and the eyes of the haughty are humbled.**

**¹⁶But YHWH of hosts is exalted by justice,
and the Holy God shows himself holy by righteousness.**

Verses 15-16 pick up the theme of 2:9, 11, 17

**¹⁷Then the lambs shall graze as in their pasture,
fatlings and kids shall feed among the ruins.**

**18 Ah, you who drag iniquity along with cords of falsehood,
 who drag sin along as with cart ropes,
 19 who say, "Let him make haste,
 let him speed up his *agenda*
 that we may see it;
 let the plan of the Holy One of Israel hasten to fulfillment,
 that we may know it!"**

Those perpetrating this injustice are cynical of anyone who speaks to them of YHWH's 'agenda' (ma^aśeh, 5:19) or 'plan' ('ēṣâ, 5:19). They have used the fact that God does not immediately punish injustice as grounds for their cynicism.

Judicial Injustice (Isaiah 5:20-24)

Compare Amos 5:7-15 and Micah 2:1.

**20 Ah, you who call evil good
 and good evil,
 who put darkness for light
 and light for darkness,
 who put bitter for sweet
 and sweet for bitter!**

Those responsible for justice have no regard for reality or the truth. They manipulate the system to suit themselves, and decide right and wrong according to their own advantage.

**21 Ah, you who are wise in your own eyes,
 and shrewd in your own sight!**

How can you say, "We are wise,
 and the law of YHWH is with us,"
 when, in fact, the false pen of the scribes
 has made it into a lie?
 The wise shall be put to shame,
 they shall be dismayed and taken;
 since they have rejected the word of YHWH,
 what wisdom is in them?

– Jeremiah 8:8-9

**22 Ah, you who are heroes in drinking wine
 and valiant at mixing drink,
 23 who acquit the guilty for a bribe,
 and deprive the innocent of their rights!
 24 Therefore, as the tongue of fire devours the stubble,
 and as dry grass sinks down in the flame,
 so their root will become rotten,
 and their blossom go up like dust;
 for they have rejected the instruction of YHWH of hosts,
 and have despised the word of the Holy One of Israel.**

Their 'wisdom' is counterfeit, having no regard for YHWH's instruction (tôrâ).

YHWH's Anger (Isaiah 5:25)

**²⁵Therefore the anger of YHWH was kindled against his people,
and he stretched out his hand against them and struck them;
the mountains quaked,
and their corpses were like refuse
in the streets.
For all this his anger has not turned away,
and his hand is stretched out still.**

The final two lines of this verse appear as a refrain in Isaiah 9:12, 17 and 21. The idea of divine 'punishment' has already appeared in Isaiah. This is the first time we have met the expression 'the anger of YHWH'. It is important to reflect on the meaning of anger and punishment as expressions of God's relationship to sinful humanity.

The psalms frequently refer to YHWH's anger. As many as eight different words are used to bring out different nuances, but the most general image is that used here. The word 'ap means 'nostrils', and hārâ adds the image of fire. The image is of someone who is breathing fire. Sometimes God's anger is portrayed as being directed against those who would oppose God's chosen people, but mostly, as here, it is portrayed as being directed against the people of Israel for being unfaithful to the covenant.

It is essential to examine the religious context in which this talk of divine anger occurs. It is within the context of an assumption that God controls what happens on earth. If a person dies, they considered that it must be as a result of God's decision. Earthquakes, storms, famine, destruction, sickness, winning or losing battles, in fact any and every event was a matter of divine decision. It is a logical step from such a view that negative experiences happen because God is punishing, angry at some human infidelity, personal, familial or tribal. Past horrors are used to warn that they will be repeated (by God) if the people do not repent.

Isaiah and those compiling the scroll automatically considered Assyrian oppression and the consequent deportation and exile of the people of Israel as a punishment from God, who must have been 'angry' with their behaviour. The appropriate human response to divine anger is fear. The people of the covenant should fear and not sin, for sin will not go unpunished. God's anger was recognised as problematic, and questions were asked: 'O God, shall one person sin and you become angry with the whole congregation?'(Numbers 16:22), but the reality was obvious to all.

In the Hebrew Scriptures it is divine compassion and mercy that transcend everything else. YHWH is essentially one who is 'slow to anger'(Exodus 34:6). This expression belongs to Israel's 'creed' (see Psalm 86:15; 103:8; 145:8; Numbers 14:18; Nehemiah 9:17; Joel 2:13; Jonah 4:2). In Psalm 89 we read: 'I will punish their sins ... but I will never withdraw my love from them or fail in my faithfulness'(Psalm 89:93). The authors of the Older Testament did not doubt God's justice and fidelity to his promises.

YHWH retains a special place in his heart for his chosen people and is always ready to forgive:

Do not rejoice over me, O my enemy; when I fall, I shall rise; when I sit in darkness, YHWH will be a light to me. I must bear the indignation of YHWH, because I have sinned against him, until he takes my side and executes judgment for me. He will bring me out to the light; I shall see his vindication. Then my enemy will see, and shame will cover her who said to me, 'Where is YHWH your God?' My eyes will see her downfall; now she will be trodden down like the mire of the streets. ... The nations shall see and be ashamed of all their might ... Who is a God like you, pardoning iniquity and passing over the transgression of the remnant of your possession? He does not retain his anger forever, because he delights in showing clemency. He will again have compassion upon us; he will tread our iniquities under foot. You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea.

– Micah 7:8-10, 16, 18-19

Later in the Isaiah scroll God will be portrayed as being reluctant to express anger: 'I do not want to be forever accusing, nor always angry, or the spirit would fail under my onslaught, the souls that I myself have made' (Isaiah 57:16). While speaking of God's anger, Jeremiah recognises that punishment is essentially something which we bring upon ourselves: 'Your own wickedness is punishing you, your own apostasies are rebuking you. Consider carefully how evil and bitter it is for you to abandon YHWH' (Jeremiah 2:19). This insight needs to be kept in mind when we read of divine anger and punishment in the Older Testament.

The revelation, so clear in Jesus, that God loves and does not control the world brings about a radical shift in our thinking about God. God is the creator and so the ultimate cause of everything that is. God, however, has chosen to give us freedom (limited but real), and to respect it. This means accepting the consequences of our use of freedom, for good and ill. Knowing this, we look for scientific explanations of natural disasters and we look for human action or inaction to explain many of the awful things that occur. When we think of God we are not looking for the proximate cause of these negative experiences. We no longer think of God as the one who decides the victor in war, and when cities are devastated, when large populations die of hunger, when natural disasters wreak havoc, we no longer think that God is arranging this to punish sinners. When the expanding Empire of Assyria devastates Judah, we do not leap to the conclusion that God is punishing the people of Judah or angry with them.

Jesus reveals God as love. If we wish to see where God is active in the often random accidents as well as in the brutal violence that afflict our world, we look for the presence of love in the midst of human tragedy. Where we find love, there we find God. Jesus is clear in his judgment of what sin is and what its effects are. He is clear, too, in his warnings of the effects of our refusal of the grace of repentance. This shows in Jesus' just anger and passionate concern to break through the apathy and hypocrisy that surrounded him. But he insists that God's initiative, God's will, is always loving. It is not God whom we must fear. Rather, we must fear our capacity to ruin our lives and the lives of others by hardening our hearts against grace (see Luke 12:4-7). Everything that God does expresses God's love, and divine love is offered to all unconditionally.

God's anger

When we read of divine anger, we are not to read it in the context of divine punishment. Rather we are to think of what we do to ourselves and to others when we reject God's grace. We are to think of God as opposing evil, as determined to bring about justice. If we are going to speak of punishment as 'divine' we are highlighting the relationship of the 'punishment' to God. We are not saying that God punishes. Rather we are acknowledging two important truths: that God is the author of the order which sin violates; and that God uses even the evil effects brought about by sin to draw us to repentance.

The language of divine anger reminds us that what we do really matters and that to receive divine pardon a change in human behaviour is required: 'If pity is shown to the wicked without their learning what saving justice is, they will continue to act wrongly in the land and they will not see the majesty of YHWH' (Isaiah 26:10).

To speak of divine anger is to speak of God's passionate concern for justice. God's initiative is always to put things right. To speak of divine anger is to speak of the terrible things that we bring upon ourselves and others when we reject God's inspiration and act against the truth. This terrible situation (this 'anger') is 'of God' in the sense that it is related to God and is the result of our failure to welcome God's grace and live in God's love. Talk of divine anger reminds us that God hates sin, and that we should hate sin as that which cuts us off from God, the source of life and of all that is good.

Through sin, as Jesus reminds us in the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15), we leave our Father's home and find ourselves feeding the pigs. None of this is God's choice. The Father awaits us with tremendous love. The God of Jesus utterly respects human freedom even when we choose to abuse it. God, however, is not a victim of our wrong choices, nor is God a bystander. God constantly pours into our hearts the love that will bring about reconciliation, justice and peace, provided we welcome God's grace and have the courage to follow God's inspiration.

Isaiah did not have the privilege of seeing God as God is revealed by Jesus. Neither he nor those who treasured his oracles realised how faulty (and, in the final analysis, dangerous) their concept of God was. Their aim was a noble one: to warn their readers to be attentive to God's will, and not to repeat the sins of the past.

The Assyrian Threat (Isaiah 5:26-30)

**²⁶He will raise an *ensign* for a nation far away,
and whistle for a people at the ends of the earth;
Here they come, swiftly, speedily!**

Isaiah is warning Judah that God is summoning Assyria to punish them, the way they have seen Assyria punish Israel. Since these words are placed here as an introduction to chapters six and the following, they may illustrate Isaiah's warning that nothing but trouble would come from Ahaz having recourse to Assyria in his conflict with Syria and Israel.

**²⁷None of them is weary, none stumbles,
none slumbers or sleeps,
not a loincloth is loose,
not a sandal-thong broken;
²⁸their arrows are sharp,
all their bows bent,
their horses' hoofs seem like flint,
and their wheels like the whirlwind.
²⁹Their roaring is like a lion,
like young lions they roar;
they growl and seize their prey,
they carry it off, and no one can rescue.
³⁰They will roar over it on that day,
like the roaring of the sea.
And if one look to the land—
only darkness and distress;
and the light grows dark with clouds.**

Isaiah's commission (6:1-13)

The fact that those who compiled the Isaiah scroll placed this scene here in chapter six indicates that they did not understand it as an initial call from God to Isaiah to be a prophet. Rather, it is a call to the specific mission described in the following chapters. In fact, as we shall see, the mission failed – and this is the key to understanding this text. The failure of the mission posed a problem. If YHWH sent Isaiah on a mission, how could the mission fail? For people who understood God as controlling whatever happens in the world (see Isaiah 3:1-5; 10:5-6,15; 29:9-10), this must mean that God willed it to fail. Since the fault was not Isaiah's it must have been the hardness of heart of those to whom Isaiah was sent. Furthermore (such is the logic of the argument), if their heart is hardened, God must have willed things this way for God's own purposes. An obvious parallel is with Moses' mission to the Pharaoh of Egypt where we hear YHWH say: 'I will harden Pharaoh's heart'(Exodus 7:3). In this case, as the previous chapters have made clear, God's purpose is understood as being to get Assyria involved, to punish Judah for the injustice that pervaded the lives of the rich and powerful, as a way of bringing them to change their ways.

¹In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. ²Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their *body*, and with two they *hovered*.

As noted in the Introduction, King Uzziah abdicated in 742 (see 2Kings 15:1-7). A likely date for his death is 736. 'Seraphs'(š^crapîm) derives from the verb 'to burn'(šārap). In one of the stories of the wilderness journey, it is used to describe serpents whose bite caused a horrible burning (see Deuteronomy 8:15; Numbers 21:6, 8). These two scenes may be related, for the bronze serpent that the people looked upon for healing on that occasion was kept as a cult object in the temple (see 2Kings 18:4), and may account for the imagery used here.

³And one called to another and said:

**"Holy, holy, holy is YHWH of hosts;
the whole earth is full of his glory."**

The expression 'YHWH of hosts'(the heavenly hosts) occurs 57 times in Isaiah 1-39. The word 'holy'(qādôš) denotes God's transcendence, while the word 'glory'(kābôd) is used for the mysterious ways in which this transcendent God is experienced as being present and active in creation..

In the New Testament, John is describing a 'vision' in which he 'sees' the heavenly throne of God.

The four living things, each of them with six wings, were covered with eyes inside and out. Day and night they continually exclaimed: "Holy, holy, holy, is YHWH God Almighty"

– Apocalypse 4:8

In the Gospel of John this revelation of glory is linked with Jesus. John writes: 'Isaiah saw his glory and spoke about him'(John 12:41).

⁴The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke.

⁵And I said:

**“Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips,
and I live among a people of unclean lips;
yet my eyes have seen the King, YHWH of hosts!”**

We are reminded of Simon Peter’s response to his encounter with Jesus: ‘Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man’(Luke 5:8).

⁶Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. ⁷The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: “Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out.”

⁸Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying,

“Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?”

And I said, “Here am I; send me!”

⁹And he said, “Go and say to this people:

**‘Keep *hearing, without comprehending;*
keep *seeing, without understanding.*’**

**¹⁰Make the mind of this people dull,
and stop their ears,
and shut their eyes,
so that they may not *see* with their eyes,
and *hear* with their ears,
and comprehend with their minds,
and *change their ways* and be healed.”**

As noted on the previous page, in fact Isaiah was not listened to – further proof of the hardness of heart of those to whom he was sent. Jesus’ mission, too, appeared to fail, and for much the same reason. Matthew quotes this passage in relation to the people’s failure to listen to Jesus (see Matthew 13:14-15), as does John (12:40). Luke quotes it at the end of Acts, for Paul’s message, too, largely went unheeded (see Acts 28:26-27).

Here in Isaiah, God’s purpose is described in the following verses. Against Isaiah’s advice the leaders of Judah will call on Assyria. This will lead in 701 to terrible devastation and exile.

¹¹Then I said, “How long, O Lord?”

And he said:

**“Until cities lie waste
without inhabitant,
and houses without people,
and the land is utterly desolate;**

**¹²until YHWH sends everyone far away,
and vast is the emptiness in the midst of the land.**

The holy seed

**¹³Even if a tenth part remain in it,
it will *revert to pasture*,
like a terebinth or an oak
whose stump remains standing
when it is felled.”
The holy seed is its stump.**

The final sentence appears to be an addition from the post-exilic editors. The returned exiles from Babylon are the ‘holy seed’ (see Ezra 9:2), the faithful few. They carry the hope of regeneration (see Isaiah 4:2-6; also 10:20-23; 11:11). They saw themselves as the ‘remnant’ spoken of by the post-exilic prophets:

Speak now to Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and to the remnant of the people.

– Haggai 2:2

Thus says YHWH of hosts: Even though it seems impossible to the remnant of this people in these days, should it also seem impossible to me, says YHWH of hosts?

– Zechariah 8:6

Introduction to Isaiah 7-9

In chapter six Isaiah is portrayed as being sent by YHWH with a message for the people of Judah (see 6:9). The following verses record the essence of the message. Before reading on let us pause to set the scene.

As noted in the Introduction the reign of King Tiglath-pileser III (744-726) was a period of Assyrian expansion. At first King Rezin of Syria had no choice but to submit to Assyria as a vassal state. However, he took the opportunity of Assyria’s concentration on its eastern borders with Urartu and Media to break away and to organise an anti-Assyrian alliance, which King Pekah of Israel joined. In 734 the Assyrian army made a victorious sweep all along the Mediterranean coastline, conquering the Philistine cities and reaching to the borders of Egypt. Syria and Israel were now vulnerable from east and west, and King Rezin of Syria and King Pekah of Israel brought pressure to bear on Jotham, king of Judah, to join the alliance (see 2Kings 15:37-38). When Jotham died that same year, and was succeeded by his young son, Ahaz, Syria and Israel decided to invade Judah in order to depose Ahaz and set up a puppet regime. They besieged Jerusalem.

This was the situation that provoked Isaiah’s intervention. His message was straightforward. It was YHWH’s will that Judah remain neutral and put its trust in YHWH, neither joining the anti-Assyrian alliance nor inviting Assyria’s protection. Not joining Syria and Israel was excellent advice in every way, but then Ahaz and his advisers showed no signs of doing that in any case. In fact, the siege had to be lifted because in 733-732 Assyria attacked and conquered Syria, and took Dor, Galilee and Gilead from Israel. Israel saved itself by a coup which replaced Pekah with Hoshea who favoured accommodation with Assyria. It would have been suicidal for Judah to align itself with the ill-fated alliance.

The other half of Isaiah’s advice, Ahaz chose to ignore. He decided to put his trust in Assyria, and to submit to the overlordship of Assyria, which involved paying tribute and opening Judah to Assyrian imperialist influence.

It is, of course, impossible for us to imagine what would have happened to Judah if it had followed Isaiah's advice, and remained neutral. It is, however, important to raise the issue. Were Ahaz's advisers correct? Did Ahaz have no realistic alternative? Was Isaiah's advice piously irrelevant in the political realities of the day? Would Judah have lost anything by remaining neutral as advised by Isaiah? The siege would have failed just the same for the reasons given above. In 722, the anti-Assyrian group in Israel staged a rebellion and Tiglath-pileser's successor, Shalmaneser V (726-722) sent in the troops. Israel was devastated, Samaria destroyed and the leading citizens were deported. Judah was not affected, but there is no reason to think that this was because it was a vassal of Assyria. It is quite likely that Assyria would have left Judah alone in any case, for it was of no strategic importance. The trade routes and the way to Egypt through the Esdraelon valley and down the Mediterranean coast were secure without taking the trouble to invade Judah.

As it turned out a negative result of Ahaz's accepting to be a vassal state to Assyria was that his son, Hezekiah, in his well-intentioned attempt to initiate religious reform in Judah, felt compelled to break off the treaty with Assyria. He was tempted to do this in 713 when Sargon II (721-705) put down a rebellion in the Philistine city of Ashdod, but took Isaiah's advice and held back (see Isaiah 20:1-6). However, with the death of Sargon in 705, Hezekiah judged that the moment was right to exert Judah's independence. He was wrong, and his fateful decision led to the devastation of Judah in 701 at the hands of Sargon's successor, Sennacherib (704-681). Sennacherib claims to have destroyed 46 fortified strongholds and taken 200,000 prisoners of war. Had Judah remained neutral in 732 this may not have eventuated. Isaiah's advice may well have been politically astute.

In any case, Ahaz's decision to link Judah's cause with that of Assyria opened Judah and Jerusalem up to Assyrian influence. By relying on Assyria and not on YHWH Ahaz led Judah down a path of religious compromise, and Judah lost its way. Isaiah's call was for Judah to put its trust in YHWH. It is this trust that gives them their identity and meaning as a people. Failure to trust YHWH can lead only to disintegration.

¹In the days of Ahaz son of Jotham son of Uzziah, king of Judah, King Rezin of Aram and King Pekah son of Remaliah of Israel went up to attack Jerusalem, but were unable to win a decisive victory against it. ²When the house of David heard that Aram had allied itself with Ephraim, the heart of Ahaz and the heart of his people shook as the trees of the forest shake before the wind.

³Then YHWH said to Isaiah, Go out to meet Ahaz, you and your son Shear-jashub, at the end of the conduit of the upper pool on the highway to the Fuller's Field,

'Shear-jashub' means 'a remnant shall return' – a name symbolic of hope that even though the people may be taken into exile, the nation will continue. The stump will produce shoots. The 'holy seed' will germinate (see 6:13).

⁴and say to him, Take heed, be quiet, do not fear, and do not let your heart be faint because of these two smouldering stumps of firebrands, because of the fierce anger of Rezin and Aram and the son of Remaliah.

⁵Because Aram—with Ephraim and the son of Remaliah—has plotted evil against you, saying, ⁶Let us go up against Judah and cut off Jerusalem and conquer it for ourselves and make the son of Tabeel king in it. ⁷therefore thus says the Lord YHWH:

**It shall not stand,
and it shall not come to pass.**

**⁸For the head of Aram is Damascus,
and the head of Damascus is Rezin.**

⁹(Within sixty-five years Ephraim will be shattered, no longer a people.)

Isaiah assures Ahaz that Syria (Aram) and Israel (Ephraim) will not succeed in defeating Judah and forcing it into an alliance. The added note which includes a reference to sixty-five years, takes us to 669, the year of the death of Asarhaddon and the accession of Ashurbanipal to the Assyrian throne. This is long after Ephraim (that is, the northern kingdom, Israel) fell (in 721). Ashurbanipal may have carried out further deportations subsequent to rebellion in the western provinces (see Ezra 4:2, 9-10).

**The head of Ephraim is Samaria,
and the head of Samaria is the son of Remaliah.
If you do not stand firm in faith,
you shall not stand at all.**

Translation loses the rhyme in the last two lines:

'im lo' ta'âmînu
ki lo' tē'âmēnu

Judah's only hope of survival is to accept YHWH's word coming to it through Isaiah.

A sign (7:10-16)

¹⁰Again YHWH spoke to Ahaz, saying, ¹¹Ask a sign of YHWH your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven.

¹²But Ahaz said, I will not ask, and I will not put YHWH to the test.

¹³Then Isaiah said: "Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary mortals, that you weary my God also?"

It is not clear why Ahaz's declining to ask for a sign merits this response. Are we to understand that Ahaz is uttering a pious phrase in an attempt to mask his lack of interest in listening to God's word?

¹⁴Therefore YHWH himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman, pregnant and carrying a son, will name him Immanuel. ¹⁵He shall eat curds and honey by the time he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good. ¹⁶For before the child knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land before whose two kings you are in dread will be deserted.

The alliance Ahaz fears will soon collapse. Young mothers now expecting will be so confident that they will name their children 'Immanuel' ('God is with us'), and within a few years Syria and Israel will be deserted.

‘almâ means ‘a young woman’ (see Genesis 24:43, referring to Rebekah; Exodus 2:8, referring to Moses’ sister, and also Proverbs 30:19). betûlâ is the word for virgin. The Greek Version, however, translated ‘almâ in this text as ‘parthenos’ (virgin). It was this that encouraged Matthew to cite this text in relation to Mary and Jesus in order to highlight the uniqueness of Jesus as God’s Son (see Matthew 1:23). Matthew is not thereby stating that either Isaiah or those responsible for compiling the Isaiah scroll were referring to Mary and her son. It is a typical example of Jewish exegesis which sees deeper, divinely intended, meanings in a text that become clear in the light of further historical experience.

Assyria will turn on Judah (7:17-25)

Isaiah goes on to warn Ahaz that if he relies on Assyria instead of on YHWH, YHWH will summon Assyria to punish Judah. He refers back to the traumatic time that followed on the death of Solomon. Judah was left isolated when the other tribes rejected the king of Judah and set up their own king in Israel (Ephraim).

¹⁷YHWH will bring on you and on your people and on your ancestral house such days as have not come since the day that Ephraim departed from Judah—the king of Assyria.”

¹⁸On that day YHWH will whistle for the fly that is at the sources of the streams of Egypt, and for the bee that is in the land of Assyria. ¹⁹And they will all come and settle in the steep ravines, and in the clefts of the rocks, and on all the thornbushes, and on all the *watering holes*.

They cannot rely on Assyria or on Egypt. Deuteronomy 1:44 and Psalm 118:12 also liken an enemy army to bees.

²⁰On that day YHWH will shave with a razor hired beyond the River—with the king of Assyria—the head and the pubic hair, and it will take off the beard as well.

This was a common way of humiliating prisoners (compare 2Samuel 10:1-5).

²¹On that day one will keep alive a young cow and two sheep, ²²and will eat curds because of the abundance of milk that they give; for everyone that is left in the land shall eat curds and honey.

The devastation is such that people will have to struggle to survive. Yet the blessing continues.

²³On that day every place where there used to be a thousand vines, worth a thousand shekels of silver, will become briers and thorns. ²⁴With bow and arrows one will go there, for all the land will be briers and thorns; ²⁵and as for all the hills that used to be hoed with a hoe, you will not go there for fear of briers and thorns; but they will become a place where cattle are let loose and where sheep *wander at will*.

The vineyard reference takes us back to 5:1-7.

Another sign (8:1-4)

¹Then YHWH said to me, Take a large placard and write on it in large legible characters, “Belonging to Maher-shalal-hash-baz,” ²and have it attested for me by reliable witnesses, the priest Uriah and Zechariah son of Jeberechiah. ³And I went to the prophetess, and she conceived and bore a son. Then YHWH said to me, Name him Maher-shalal-hash-baz; ⁴for before the child knows how to call “My father” or “My mother,” the wealth of Damascus and the spoil of Samaria will be carried away by the king of Assyria.

The child’s name is symbolic: ‘Quick spoils - speedy plunder’. The prophetess (n^ebî’â) was presumably a recognised member of the ‘prophets’(nābî’) of the Jerusalem temple. This was an official group to whom people went to receive an oracle from God (compare Huldah, 2Kings 22:14). Isaiah seems to have had significant supporters, including the chief priest, Uriah (2Kings 16:10-16) and Ahaz’s father-in-law, Zechariah (2Kings 18:2). This sign reinforces the one given in 7:14-16. It won’t be long before Damascus and Israel are devastated by Assyria, so don’t give in to their pressure.

⁵YHWH spoke to me again: “Because this people has refused the waters of Shiloah that flow gently, and rejoices in Rezin and the son of Remaliah; ⁷therefore, the Lord is bringing up against it the mighty flood waters of the River, the king of Assyria and all his glory; it will rise above all its channels and overflow all its banks; ⁸it will sweep on into Judah as a flood, and, pouring over, it will reach up to the neck; and its outspread wings will fill the breadth of your land, O Immanuel.

Judah is here addressed as ‘Immanuel’ – a reminder that YHWH is with them, and that they should be putting their trust in him. Shiloah was a channel which took water to Jerusalem and the Kidron valley from the Gihon spring. It was replaced by Hezekiah who diverted the water underground and caused it to enter the city itself, behind the fortified wall. The second half of verse six is obscure. If ‘rejoices in’ is correct as a translation of the Hebrew, Isaiah is here addressing those in Jerusalem who favoured joining the Syria-Israel alliance. He is warning them that Assyria will devastate the land. However, this does not mean that God is not with us. The land still belongs to God (Immanuel).

**⁹Band together, you peoples, and be dismayed;
listen, all you far countries;
gird yourselves and be dismayed;
gird yourselves and be dismayed!
¹⁰Take counsel together, but it shall be brought to naught;
speak a word, but it will not stand,
for God is with us.**

Verses nine and ten appear to be a post-exilic comment inviting people to draw the right conclusion from the story of the division and plotting in the Jerusalem court in 732. Party politics will get them nowhere. They must remember that they are ‘Immanuel’: ‘God is with us’(‘immānū ’ēl). The only hope for a future is to place their trust in YHWH.

Psalm 46 reflects the point of Isaiah's oracle.

God is our refuge and strength,
 a very present help in trouble.
 Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change,
 though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea;
 though its waters roar and foam,
 though the mountains tremble with its tumult. Selah

There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God,
 the holy habitation of the Most High.
 God is in the midst of the city; it shall not be moved;
 God will help it when the morning dawns.
 The nations are in an uproar, the kingdoms totter;
 he utters his voice, the earth melts.
 YHWH of hosts is with us;
 the God of Jacob is our refuge. Selah

Come, behold the works of YHWH;
 see what desolations he has brought on the earth.
 He makes wars cease to the end of the earth;
 he breaks the bow, and shatters the spear;
 he burns the shields with fire.
 "Be still, and know that I am God!
 I am exalted among the nations,
 I am exalted in the earth."
 YHWH of hosts is with us;
 the God of Jacob is our refuge. Selah

¹¹For YHWH spoke thus to me while his hand was strong upon me, and warned me not to walk in the way of this people, saying: ¹²Do not call conspiracy all that this people calls conspiracy, and do not fear what it fears, or be in dread. ¹³But YHWH of hosts, him you shall regard as holy; let him be your fear, and let him be your dread. ¹⁴He will become a sanctuary, a stone one strikes against; for both houses of Israel he will become a rock one stumbles over—a trap and a snare for the inhabitants of Jerusalem. ¹⁵And many among them shall stumble; they shall fall and be broken; they shall be snared and taken.

Isaiah and those who support him in siding neither with Syria-Israel nor with Assyria are being encouraged. YHWH on whom they trust is 'YHWH of hosts'. He can call on all the powers of heaven and earth to fight his cause. In the New Testament, Peter calls on the Christians not to be afraid but to trust in the Holy One:

'If you should suffer because of righteousness, blessed are you.
 Do not be afraid or terrified by fear of them,
 but sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts.

– 1Peter 3:14-15

Verse fourteen is quoted in Romans 9:33 and 1 Peter 2:8 (see also Luke 20:18).

¹⁶Bind up the testimony, seal the teaching among my disciples. ¹⁷I will wait for YHWH, who is hiding his face from the house of Jacob, and I will hope in him.

Isaiah's word has been met by a hardening of heart. YHWH's word is being fulfilled (see 6:9-10). They do not want to listen to God's word through Isaiah because they do not want to 'change their ways and be healed'(6:10). But the word of YHWH cannot be lost. The time will come when it will be heard. The 'Isaiah School' has preserved his words and continued to ponder them generation after generation.

¹⁸See, I and the children whom YHWH has given me are signs and portents in Israel from YHWH of hosts, who dwells on Mount Zion.

Isaiah seems to be referring to his children with their symbolic names: 'Shear-jashub'(7:3 – 'a remnant shall return') and 'Maher-shalal-hash-baz'(8:3, 'quick spoils - speedy plunder').

¹⁹Now if people say to you, "Consult the ghosts and the familiar spirits that chirp and mutter; should not a people consult their gods, the dead on behalf of the living, ²⁰for teaching and for instruction?" Surely, those who speak like this will have no dawn!

Those wielding power in Jerusalem are consulting anything they can get their hands on, but failing to listen to YHWH who alone can give them 'teaching'(tôrâ) and 'instruction'(t'ê'ûdâ).

Description of the aftermath of the Assyrian invasion of 732 (8:21 – 9:1)

This is a powerful poetic description of the situation in northern Israel the threat of which caused Israel to try to force Judah to join in an anti-Assyrian alliance. Assyria annexed Galilee, and had control of the Esdraelon Plain and the Mediterranean coastline. All that remained of Israel was the hill country of Samaria. The following is my translation taken from an unpublished Italian version by Horacio Simian-Yofre SJ, professor in the Pontifical Biblical Institute, Rome.

²¹He [a nameless refugee] wanders across it [a nameless land], oppressed and hungry. Starving and desperate he curses his king and his God as he turns his face upward.

²²Downward to the earth he looks.

Nothing but anguish, darkness, swirling oppression, confused gloom .

^{9:1}There is no glimmer of light for an oppressed land: the humiliation of the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali; oppression in the Way of the Sea, in Transjordan and in the Galilee of the nations".

Assyria divided northern Israel into three provinces: The way of the sea (Du'ru [Dor]); Transjordan (Gal'azu [Gilead]); and 'Galilee of the nations'(Magidû [Megiddo]). It is in this area that Jesus' ministry began (see Matthew 4:15, where this text is quoted).

A light in the darkness (9:2-7)

In its original setting this may have been a prophetic oracle from Isaiah on the occasion of the birth of Ahaz's son, Hezekiah. As noted earlier the chronology of this period of Judah's history is unclear. If Hezekiah's reign began in 714, he may have been born in 732. This would fit with the sign given earlier, in which 'Immanuel' may have also been referring to Hezekiah (see Isaiah 7:14). As the text stands it is so general as to be able to be reapplied to evoke hope at the birth of other princes to the house of David.

**²The people walking in darkness
have seen a great light;
on those dwelling in a land of deep darkness—
light has dawned.**

Matthew continues his quote from Isaiah to include verse two, for he sees Jesus as the one who finally fulfilled the promise contained in this prophecy. Matthew is not the only New Testament author to speak of Jesus in terms of light. Luke speaks of

the tender mercy of our God through whom the rising sun comes to visit us,
to shine on those who dwell in darkness and under the shadow of death.

– Luke 1:79

In John's Gospel we hear Jesus proclaim:

I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness,
but will have the light of life.

– John 8:12

Paul speaks of the enlightenment brought to the world by Jesus:

God who said 'Let light shine out of darkness' has shone in our hearts
to bring to light the knowledge of the glory of God on the face of Christ.

–2 Corinthians 4:6

**³You have enlarged the nation,
you have increased its joy;
they rejoice before you
as with joy at the harvest,
as people exult when dividing plunder.**

**⁴For the yoke of their burden,
and the bar across their shoulders,
the rod of their oppressor,
you have broken as on the day of Midian.**

There are two accounts of victories against Midian, one in Transjordan during Moses' time (see Numbers 31), and one at the time of Gideon (Judges 6).

**⁵For all the boots of the tramping warriors
and all the garments rolled in blood
shall be burned as fuel for the fire.**

**⁶For a child is born for us,
a son given to us.**

The birth of a child is a sign that life goes on.

A child is born for us

**⁶authority rests upon his shoulders;
and he is named
Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
⁷His authority shall grow continually,
and there shall be endless peace
for the throne of David and his kingdom.
He will establish and uphold it
with justice and with righteousness
from this time onward and forevermore.
The zeal of YHWH of hosts will do this.**

The names given to the child are modelled on the names given by a deity to the king on his accession to the throne. ‘Wonderful Counsellor’ – he will be one who shares in the power of YHWH to work wonders, to establish plans that can lead the people to recognise YHWH’s way and to discover his will as revealed in his word. ‘Mighty God’ – he will be filled with the numinous power of God against external enemies. ‘Everlasting Father’ – he will be the divinely appointed father of Judah and his reign will endure. The language here is echoed in Psalm 72:

May he live while the sun endures,
and as long as the moon, throughout all generations ...
In his days may righteousness flourish
and peace abound, until the moon is no more.

– Psalm 72:5,7

‘Prince of Peace’ – he will establish the land in security, prosperity and political stability, based on obedience to God’s revealed will. He will reign on David’s throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with just decrees (*mišpāt*) and righteousness (*šēdāqā*).

The final statement (‘the zeal of YHWH of hosts will do this’) expresses Isaiah’s conviction that everything depends on YHWH and that they can and should put their trust in him. It is also a phrase that could be repeated again and again in different circumstances. In post-exilic Judah, when there was no longer a throne in Judah, they began to look to the future for a fuller realisation of the promise made here through Isaiah. In the New Testament, the disciples of Jesus saw him as this fulfilment.

YHWH God will give him the throne of David his father,
and he will rule over the House of Jacob forever
and of his kingdom there will be no end.

– Luke 1:32-33

Israel fails to learn I (9:8-12)

Isaiah seems to be referring to two recent disasters that have fallen on Israel. This description of the first disaster sounds like a reference to an earthquake. Amos seems to be referring to it when he challenges the people to return to YHWH – a challenge they ignored.

I will tear down the winter house as well as the summer house;
and the houses of ivory shall perish,
and the great houses shall come to an end, says YHWH.

– Amos 3:15

See, YHWH commands, and the great house shall be shattered to bits,
and the little house to pieces.

– Amos 6:11

After the first disaster they confidently rebuilt only to be struck by a second one. The description seems to refer to a military incursion from Syria and Philistia, perhaps on the death of Jeroboam II (746).

**⁸The Lord sent a word against Jacob,
and it fell on Israel;
⁹and all the people knew it—
Ephraim and the inhabitants of Samaria—
but in pride and arrogance of heart they said:
¹⁰“The bricks have fallen,
but we will build with dressed stones;
the sycamores have been cut down,
but we will put cedars in their place.”
¹¹So YHWH raised adversaries against them,
and stirred up their enemies,
¹²the Arameans on the east and the Philistines on the west,
and they devoured Israel with open mouth.
*For all this his anger has not turned away;
his hand is stretched out still.***

Israel fails to learn II (9:13-17)

YHWH was punishing them so that they would turn to him and seek him. Because Israel failed to heed God’s ‘word’(9:8), they suffered further disasters. Cutting off head and tail (9:14) seems to be a reference to the loss of territory on both sides of the Jordan during the campaigns of Tiglath-pileser (738-732) – already described in 9:1. A later editor offers another explanation in verse fifteen.

**¹³The people did not turn to him who struck them,
or seek YHWH of hosts.
¹⁴So YHWH cut off from Israel head and tail,
palm branch and reed in one day—
¹⁵elders and dignitaries are the head,
and prophets who teach lies are the tail;
¹⁶for those who led this people led them astray,
and those who were led by them were left in confusion.**

Israel fails to learn

**¹⁷That is why the Lord did not have pity on their young people,
or compassion on their orphans and widows;
for everyone was godless and an evildoer,
and every mouth spoke folly.
For all this his anger has not turned away,
his hand is stretched out still.**

Notice the refrain repeated from verse twelve, and repeated again in verse twenty-one, and chapter ten verse four. It is also in 5:25 as we have already seen. A similar refrain is found in Amos: 'I will not revoke the punishment' (see Amos 1:3, 9, 11, 13; 4:1, 4, 6), and the other refrain: 'You did not return to me' (Amos 4:6-11).

Israel fails to learn III (9:18-21)

This is the climax which takes us to the last days before the collapse of Israel and the destruction of Samaria in 721. The language is that of covenant curses (see Deuteronomy 28:53-57). They have severed their bond with YHWH, and this is the consequence.

**¹⁸For wickedness burned like a fire,
consuming briars and thorns;
it kindled the thickets of the forest,
and they swirled upward in a column of smoke.
¹⁹Through the wrath of YHWH of hosts
the land was burned,
and the people became like fuel for the fire;
no one spared another.**

We recall the words of Amos:

I overthrew some of you, as when God overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah,
and you were like a brand snatched from the fire;
yet you did not return to me, says YHWH.

– Amos 4:11.

**²⁰They gorged on the right, but still were hungry,
and they devoured on the left, but were not satisfied;
they devoured the flesh of their own kindred;
²¹Manasseh devoured Ephraim, and Ephraim Manasseh,
and together they were against Judah.
For all this his anger has not turned away;
his hand is stretched out still.**

Israel fails to learn IV (10:1-4)

This picks up the theme of 5:8-24 and takes us to the heart of Isaiah's critique.

**¹Ah, you who make iniquitous decrees,
who write oppressive statutes,
²to turn aside the needy from justice
and to rob the poor of my people of their right,
that widows may be your spoil,
and that you may make the orphans your prey!**

That Israel did not listen is shown by the way those in leadership neglect the needy. Care for the poor is of the essence of Yahwism. Isaiah is not alone in speaking out against the servants of the state (whether in the court or in the temple) who manipulate the legal system to secure the advantage of the rich and powerful and have no care for God's poor:

The priests did not say, "Where is YHWH?"
 Those who handle the law did not know me;
 the rulers transgressed against me;
 the prophets prophesied by Baal,
 and went after things that do not profit.

– Jeremiah 2:8

**³What will you do on the day of punishment,
 in the calamity that will come from far away?**

'Calamity' translates the Hebrew שׁוֹאָה (the term used to describe the Nazi holocaust of the Second World War).

**To whom will you flee for help,
 and where will you leave your wealth,
⁴so as not to crouch among the prisoners
 or fall among the slain?
 For all this his anger has not turned away;
 his hand is stretched out still.**

Assyria: the rod used by YHWH to punish (10:5-14)

It is not surprising that Judah's first encounter with Assyria (732) continued to be a paradigm for understanding and giving expression to Judah's attitude towards successive imperial powers, including Babylon, Persia and Greece. When other nations were victorious over Judah, it was taken for granted that this must be God's will. It was, therefore, seen as God's way of punishing sin and calling for a change of behaviour. That this did not justify the atrocities committed by invading armies is made clear here. Judah's enemies, too, would have to answer for their behaviour.

**⁵Ah, Assyria, the rod of my anger—
 the club in their hands is my fury!
⁶Against a godless nation I send him,
 and against the people of my wrath I command him,
 to take spoil and seize plunder,
 and to tread them down like the mire of the streets.**

Earlier themes are repeated: YHWH's anger (see 5:25; 9:12, 17, 21); a rod for punishment (9:4); the godless people (9:17); Isaiah's child's symbolic name 'Maher-shalal-hash-baz' ('Quick spoils - speedy plunder', 8:1-4); tread down (5:5; 7:25). In 732 those listening to Isaiah would have been thinking of Israel as 'the godless nation'. In 701, they would have had to apply this to themselves.

Assyria will be punished

The boast of the Assyrian king illustrates Assyrian pride.

**⁷But this is not what he intends,
nor does he have this in mind;
but it is in his heart to destroy,
and to cut off nations not a few.**

⁸For he says:

“Are not my commanders all kings?

⁹Is not Calno like Carchemish?

Is not Hamath like Arpad?

Is not Samaria like Damascus?

**¹⁰As my hand has reached to the kingdoms of the idols
whose images were greater than those of Jerusalem and Samaria,**

**¹¹shall I not do to Jerusalem and her idols
what I have done to Samaria and her images?”**

Sargon II conquered the Hittite city, Carchemish, and the Syrian cities, Arpad and Damascus. in 717. What is to stop Assyria conquering Calno and Hamath (also in Syria; see Amos 6:2), as well as Samaria, the capital of Israel, and Jerusalem, the capital of Judah? The gods of Israel and Judah are no match for the gods of Assyria! Verse eleven would appear to fit some time after 721, for Samaria has already fallen.

The following verses insist that, while God is using Assyria to punish Israel and Judah, Assyria will also be punished and its pride brought low.

**¹²When YHWH has finished all his work on Mount Zion and on Jerusalem,
he will punish the arrogant boasting of the king of Assyria and his haughty
pride. ¹³For he says:**

**“By the strength of my hand I have done it,
and by my wisdom, for I have understanding;
I have removed the boundaries of peoples,
and have plundered their treasures;
like a bull I have brought down those who sat on thrones.**

**¹⁴My hand has found, like a nest,
the wealth of the peoples;
and as one gathers eggs that have been forsaken,
so I have gathered all the earth;
and there was none that moved a wing,
or opened its mouth, or chirped.”**

Reflections on Assyria's pride (10:15-19)

**¹⁵Shall the axe vaunt itself over the one who wields it,
or the saw magnify itself against the one who handles it?
As if a rod should raise the one who lifts it up,
or as if a staff should lift the one who is not wood!**

Assyria is the axe-saw-rod-staff. YHWH is the one wielding it. Any success that Assyria has is due to YHWH. Assyria has nothing in which to take pride.

**¹⁶Therefore the Sovereign, YHWH of hosts,
will send wasting sickness among his stout warriors,
and under his glory a burning will be kindled,
like the burning of fire.**

‘Sovereign’ translates the Hebrew *ādôn* (‘Lord’). YHWH is Lord of all. Every nation, including Assyria, must recognise him as such. Assyria is proud of its ‘stout warriors’. YHWH will inflict them with a wasting sickness. Assyria’s ‘glory’ – its leading citizens (compare 5:13) – will be reduced to ash. Assyria is laying waste Israel and Judah, but Assyria itself will be laid waste. Assyria’s scorched earth policy will see Assyria’s forests destroyed.

**¹⁷The light of Israel will become a fire,
and his Holy One a flame;
and it will burn and devour
his thorns and briars in one day.**

**¹⁸The glory of his forest and his fruitful land
YHWH will destroy, *root and branch*,
and it will be as when an invalid wastes away.**

**¹⁹The remnant of the trees of his forest will be so few
that a child can *count and record* them.**

Later editorial comments (10:20-27a)

1. There will always be some in Israel and Judah who will ‘lean on YHWH in truth’.

²⁰On that day the remnant of Israel and the survivors of the house of Jacob will no more lean on the one who struck them, but will lean on YHWH, the Holy One of Israel, in truth. ²¹A remnant will return, the remnant of Jacob, to the mighty God. ²²For though your people Israel were like the sand of the sea, only a remnant of them will return. Destruction is decreed, overflowing with righteousness. ²³For the Lord YHWH of hosts will make a full end, as decreed, in all the earth.

2. Judah had to face Assyria’s anger when Hezekiah refused to pay tribute in 704. Could the following verses have been added when Judah was under the Seleucids (early third century)?

²⁴Therefore thus says the Lord YHWH of hosts: O my people, who live in Zion, do not be afraid of the Assyrians when they beat you with a rod and lift up their staff against you as the Egyptians did. ²⁵For in a very little while my indignation will come to an end, and my anger will be directed to their destruction.

3. Are the following verses a reference to Judah under the Ptolemies (late fourth century)?

²⁶YHWH of hosts will wield a whip against them, as when he struck Midian at the rock of Oreb; his staff will be over the sea, and he will lift it as he did in Egypt. ²⁷On that day his burden will be removed from your shoulder, and his yoke will be destroyed from your neck.

Assyria's advance (10:27-34)

The situation that fits the following verses best is Sargon's military campaign against the Philistine city-states in 712. Jerusalem is threatened, but is safe.

- ²⁷He has gone up from Rimmon,
²⁸he has come to Aiath;
he has passed through Migron,
at Michmash he stores his baggage;
²⁹they have crossed over the pass,
at Geba they lodge for the night;
Ramah trembles,
Gibeah of Saul has fled.
³⁰Cry aloud, O daughter Gallim!
Listen, O Laishah!
Answer her, O Anathoth!
³¹Madmenah is in flight,
the inhabitants of Gebim flee for safety.
³²This very day he will halt at Nob,
he will shake his fist
at the mount of daughter Zion,
the hill of Jerusalem.

The text concludes by picking up the imagery of 10:18-19. Assyria will be felled by YHWH, the Sovereign Lord.

- ³³Look, the Sovereign, YHWH of hosts,
will lop the boughs with terrifying power;
the tallest trees will be cut down,
and the lofty will be brought low.
³⁴He will hack down the thickets of the forest with an ax,
and Lebanon with its majestic trees will fall.

Introduction to Isaiah 11:1-9

There is no consensus among scholars concerning the author of this poem. Some attribute it to Isaiah, others judge that it is more likely to be the sentiments of a person writing after the end of the dynastic Davidic monarchy in Judah, trusting that YHWH will raise up a truly spirit-filled leader who will administer the realm with the justice willed by YHWH. It is consistent with Isaiah's central insights and is included here perhaps because of Isaiah 10:32-33 which speaks of the destruction of the Assyrian 'forest'. By contrast there will be new growth in Judah (compare 6:13).

**¹A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse,
and a branch shall grow out of his roots.**

**²The spirit of YHWH shall rest on him,
the spirit of wisdom and understanding,
the spirit of counsel and might,
the spirit of knowledge and the fear of YHWH.**

[³His delight shall be in the fear of YHWH.]

In the deepest sense, wisdom (*ḥokmâ*) is an openness to receive revelation. True understanding (*bînâ*) can come only from communion with the divine. It is insight into the implications of divine revelation for one's own life and for the life of the community. Wisdom and understanding/insight are two traditional kingly gifts

The king is like the angel of God, discerning good and evil.

– 2Samuel 14:17 (re David)

I give you a wise and discerning mind/heart.

– 1Kings 3:12 (re Solomon)

All Israel heard of the judgment that the king had rendered; and they stood in awe of the king, because they perceived that the wisdom of God was in him, to execute justice.

– 1Kings 3:28 (re Solomon)

I have good advice and sound wisdom; I have insight, I have strength.

– Proverbs.8:14

Counsel (*'ētsâ*) is the ability to plan well. It opens a person to the inspiration of God's Spirit guiding one's decisions. Might (*g'êbûrâ*) is the capacity to carry out the plans once made. These are also two traditional kingly gifts

He is named Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God.

– Isaiah 9:5

I have good advice and sound wisdom; I have insight, I have strength.

– Proverbs.8:14

Knowledge (*da'at*) refers especially to knowing God's will. Fear (*yîr'â*) of YHWH (perhaps better 'Fear *from* YHWH') speaks of the fundamental religious attitude of living one's life in the presence of God and according to God's will. This sense of the sacred stops us taking God for granted and awakens in us a profound sense of awe, wonder and respect for God and for all that God holds in existence. The first line in verse three appears to be a later addition to the poem. The following texts help clarify the meaning of 'fear of YHWH'.

Fear of YHWH

- The fear of YHWH is the beginning of wisdom. – Proverbs 9:10
- The fear of YHWH is the fountain of life. – Proverbs 14:27
- The fear of YHWH is hatred of evil. – Proverbs 8:13
- Do not be afraid. God has come only to test you and to put
Fear of YHWH upon you so that you do not sin. – Exodus 20:20
- Happy are those who fear YHWH, who greatly delight in his commandments. – Psalm 112:1
- Let those who fear YHWH say: His steadfast love endures forever. – Psalm 118:2
- YHWH looks on those who fear him, on those who hope in his love. – Psalm 33:18

The Septuagint Greek Version adds a seventh gift here, ‘piety’(eusebeia) – the gift of looking to God as ‘Father’, putting one’s trust in him and depending on him. With the addition of this seventh gift the present text is the origin of the traditional seven gifts of the Holy Spirit.

The reality of these qualities is tested by the equitable administration of justice, a theme that we have already seen to be at the heart of Isaiah’s prophetic message (see Isaiah 1:17, 23; 3:13-15; 5:7, 18-23)

- ³He shall not judge by what his eyes see,
or decide by what his ears hear;
⁴but with righteousness he shall judge the poor,
and decide with equity for the meek of the earth;
he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth,
and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked.
⁵Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist,
and faithfulness the belt around his loins.**

‘Righteousness’(šedeq) featured in the opening chapter:

How the faithful city has become a whore! She that was full of justice,
righteousness lodged in her— but now murderers! ...

I will restore your judges as at the first, and your counselors as at the beginning.
Afterward you shall be called the city of righteousness, the faithful city.

– Isaiah 1:21, 26

‘Faithfulness’(‘emûnâ) is a sharing in the faithfulness of YHWH:

YHWH, you are my God; I will exalt you, I will praise your name;
for you have done wonderful things, plans formed of old, faithful and sure.

– Isaiah 25:1

Basic to the duties of the king is to administer YHWH's justice. This is expressed with special power in Psalm 72:1-4, 12-14.

Give the king your justice, O God,
and your righteousness to a king's son.
May he judge your people with righteousness,
and your poor with justice.
May the mountains yield prosperity for the people,
and the hills, in righteousness.
May he defend the cause of the poor of the people,
give deliverance to the needy,
and crush the oppressor.
For he delivers the needy when they call,
the poor and those who have no helper.
He has pity on the weak and the needy,
and saves the lives of the needy.
From oppression and violence he redeems their life;
and precious is their blood in his sight.

**⁶The wolf shall live with the lamb,
the leopard shall lie down with the kid,
the calf and the lion and the fatling together,
and a little child shall lead them.**

**⁷The cow and the bear shall graze,
their young shall lie down together;
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.**

**⁸The *infant* shall play over the hole of the *cobra*,
and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den.**

**⁹They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain;
for the earth will be full of the knowledge of YHWH
as the waters cover the sea.**

The coexistence of powerful predatory animals with animals that are their natural prey, and the safety of a child with a venomous serpent, are images for the kind of peace that is possible in this world if only people had 'knowledge of YHWH'.

Two Appendices to Isaiah 11:1-9

The themes point to composition in the years following the return from exile in Babylon.

¹⁰On that day the root of Jesse shall stand as a signal to the peoples; the nations shall inquire of him, and glory will rest on him.

The first appendix (11:10) picks up the theme of the ‘root’ of Jesse (11:1), and the ‘resting on him’ of YHWH’s Spirit (11:2), and expands the picture of the ideal ruler to be ‘a signal to the peoples’ that will cause them to ‘inquire of him’. This reverses an earlier image when YHWH raised up a ‘signal’ to summon Assyria to punish Israel (see 5:26).

The second appendix (11:11-16) pictures YHWH calling back from exile. People were deported from Israel in 721, from Judah in 701, and from Jerusalem in 597 and 586.

¹¹On that day the Lord will extend his hand yet a second time to recover the remnant that is left of his people, from Assyria, from Egypt, from Pathros, from Cush, from Elam, from Shinar, from Hamath, and from the coastlands of the sea.

Pathros is Upper (southern) Egypt. Cush (Nubia) is part of today’s Sudan. Shinar is Kuwait and southern Iraq. Elam is east of Mesopotamia. Babylon is in Shinar. Hamath is in northern Syria. The ‘coastlands’ refers to the Phoenician coastal regions; or if ‘islands’ is meant, it may refer to the Aegean islands. In an earlier scene YHWH ‘extended his hand’ in anger (5:25). Now he is reaching out to gather all his people back to the Promised Land.

**¹²He will raise a signal for the nations,
and will assemble *those cast out* of Israel,
and gather the dispersed of Judah
from the four corners of the earth.**

The ‘signal’ links back to 11:10.

**¹³The jealousy of Ephraim shall depart,
the hostility of Judah shall be cut off;
Ephraim shall not be jealous of Judah,
and Judah shall not be hostile towards Ephraim.**

The reunion of Ephraim and Judah reverses centuries of antipathy (see Isaiah 9:21), suspicion and ill-feeling that were still present in post-exilic times (see Ezra 4:1-3).

**¹⁴But they shall swoop down on the backs of the Philistines in the west,
together they shall plunder the people of the east.
They shall put forth their hand against Edom and Moab,
and the Ammonites shall obey them.**

The combined forces of Judah and Israel will dominate both sides of the Jordan. The following verses go even further and speak of YHWH drying up of the Red Sea (‘the tongue of the sea of Egypt’), and making a highway to cross the Tigris and the Euphrates for the coming home of all those deported in earlier times.

**¹⁵And YHWH will utterly destroy
the tongue of the sea of Egypt;
and will wave his hand over the River
with his scorching wind;
and will split it into seven channels,
and make a way to cross on foot;
¹⁶so there shall be a highway from Assyria
for the remnant that is left of his people,
as there was for Israel
when they came up from the land of Egypt.**

Isaiah 12: Conclusion to Isaiah 1-11

This is a post-exilic invitation to celebrate the fact that the judgments announced by Isaiah are now in the past. The authors cite and allude to texts sung in the temple to encourage their contemporaries to thank and praise God for the opportunity given them to be what they are called to be: the people of the Holy One of Israel.

Psalm One (12:1-2)

¹You will say in that day:

**I will give thanks to you, YHWH,
for though you were angry with me,
your anger turned away,
and you comforted me.**

**²Surely God is my salvation;
I will trust, and will not be afraid,
for YH YHWH is my strength and my might;
he has become my salvation.**

‘Comfort’ (nāham) is echoed in the opening words of Isaiah 40:

Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God.

– Isaiah 40:1

The people are being summoned to rejoice, for Assyria was, indeed, defeated, as was Babylon. It will be the same for all who oppress YHWH’s people. They must put their trust in their God. The return to Judah was a Second Exodus:

Sing to YHWH a new song, his praise from the end of the earth!
Let the sea roar and all that fills it, the coastlands and their inhabitants.
Let the desert and its towns lift up their voice, the villages that Kedar inhabits;
let the inhabitants of Sela sing for joy, let them shout from the tops of the mountains.
Let them give glory to YHWH, and declare his praise in the coastlands.
YHWH goes forth like a soldier, like a warrior he stirs up his fury;
he cries out, he shouts aloud, he shows himself mighty against his foes.

– Isaiah 42:10-13

Sing for joy, O heavens, and exult, O earth; break forth, O mountains, into singing!
For YHWH has comforted his people, and will have compassion on his suffering ones.

– Isaiah 49:13

The Holy One of Israel

The word ‘salvation’ (y^éšû‘â) links back with the word ‘Isaiah’ (y^éša‘yāhû) in the opening verse of the scroll (Isaiah 1:1) forming an envelope for the opening section. It is a quote from the song celebrating the escape from Egypt:

YHWH is my strength and my might, and he has become my salvation.

– Exodus 15:2

See also the following from the hymnal of the Second Temple:

I thank you that you have answered me and have become my salvation.

– Psalm 118:21

Link (12:3)

³With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation.

This outburst of joy may come from the liturgy of the *šimḥat bēt ha-šō’evâ* (‘rejoicing of the place of drawing water’) from the festival Sukkot (see the Mishna Sukkah 4:9 - 5:1). This is the context in which, in the New Testament, Jesus proclaims:

On the last day of the festival, the great day, while Jesus was standing there, he cried out, “Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, ‘Out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water.’” Now he said this about the Spirit, which believers in him were to receive; for as yet there was no Spirit, because Jesus was not yet glorified.

– John 7:37-39

Psalm Two (12:4-6)

⁴And you will say in that day:

**Give thanks to YHWH,
call on his name;
make known his deeds among the nations;
proclaim that his name is exalted.**

**⁵Sing praises to YHWH, for he has done gloriously;
let this be known in all the earth.**

The following words were sung in the temple:

O give thanks to YHWH call on his name,
make known his deeds among the peoples.

– Psalm 105:1

Let them praise the name of YHWH, for his name alone is exalted;
his glory is above earth and heaven.

– Psalm 148:13

⁶Shout aloud and sing for joy, O royal Zion, for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel.

The expression ‘The Holy One of Israel’ has been a theme throughout this first part of the Isaiah scroll (see Isaiah 1:4; 5:19, 24; 6:3; 10:20). Of special significance is the vision experienced by Isaiah in the temple in which he heard the words: ‘Holy, holy, holy is YHWH of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory’ (Isaiah 6:3); and the promise that the day would come when ‘the remnant of Israel and the survivors of the house of Jacob ... will lean on YHWH, the Holy One of Israel, in truth’ (Isaiah 10:20).