

ISAIAH 13-27

Israel's enemies will fall

Isaiah's oracles were directed to his contemporaries at the time of Assyrian expansion. To understand the texts in this section we need to keep in mind the freedom that later editors felt to see in Isaiah's oracles models for grasping YHWH's intention in regard to later empires, especially the Babylonian. Sometimes they reshaped Isaiah's words in order to express what they understood YHWH was wanting to say to them and their contemporaries in their changed circumstances. At times they created new prophecies out of old ones, always with the aim of discovering and giving expression to God's presence and action in their world as they found it in the inspired words of the great prophet. The previous section was almost entirely devoted to Isaiah's critique of the rulers of Judah. For the most part this section is directed against foreign nations. In chapters 1-12, Assyria was summoned by YHWH as his instrument in punishing Israel (see 5:26-30; 7:17-25). There was also the promise that the oppression would come to an end (9:4-5; 10:24-27), and the assurance that Assyria would be punished for its crimes (10:12-19, 25-26). It is this last idea that is developed in this section, applying Isaiah's words to a series of hostile nations, beginning with Babylon, which in 612 succeeded Assyria as the dominant power in the region. Babylon was responsible for the capture of Jerusalem in 597 and its destruction in 586, along with the deportation of its leading citizens. Babylon was captured by Cyrus II of Persia in 539, and this first text seems to fit best the situation c.550 just before Cyrus conquered the Medes.

The Fall of Babylon as an example of Universal Judgment (13:1-21)

¹The oracle concerning Babylon that Isaiah son of Amoz saw.

The term 'oracle' (maššā', literally a 'lifting up' of the voice to proclaim a word from God) will recur throughout this section.

**²On a bare hill raise a signal,
cry aloud to them;
wave the hand for them to enter
the gates of the nobles.**

**³I myself have commanded my consecrated ones,
have summoned my warriors, my proudly exulting ones,
to execute my anger.**

**⁴Listen, a tumult on the mountains
as of a great multitude!
Listen, an uproar of kingdoms,
of nations gathering together!
YHWH of hosts is mustering
an army for battle.**

**⁵They come from a distant land,
from the end of the heavens,
YHWH and the weapons of his indignation,
to destroy the whole earth.**

No city is named yet, for, as the final line makes clear, the text is meant to apply generally to any and every nation that arouses YHWH's anger. Opposition to YHWH will not be tolerated.

**⁶Wail, for the day of YHWH is near;
it will come like destruction from the Almighty!
⁷Therefore all hands will be feeble,
and every human heart will melt,
⁸and they will be dismayed.
Pangs and agony will seize them;
they will be in anguish like a woman in labor.
They will look aghast at one another;
their faces will be aflame.**

Though this is the first time in the Isaiah scroll that we have met the expression ‘the day of YHWH’, the idea runs throughout Isaiah chapter two (see 2:12, page 17). ‘The Almighty’ (13:6) translates šaday – the only time this title for God appears in Isaiah. Its use here is possibly because of the similarity in sound to the word ‘destruction’ (šādad).

**⁹See, the day of YHWH comes,
cruel, with wrath and fierce anger,
to make the earth a desolation,
and to destroy its sinners from it.
¹⁰For the stars of the heavens and their constellations
will not give their light;
the sun will be dark at its rising,
and the moon will not shed its light.
¹¹I will punish the world for its evil,
and the wicked for their iniquity;
I will put an end to the pride of the arrogant,
and lay low the insolence of tyrants.
¹²I will make mortals more rare than fine gold,
and humans than the gold of Ophir.
¹³Therefore I will make the heavens tremble,
and the earth will be shaken out of its place,
at the wrath of YHWH of hosts
in the day of his fierce anger.
¹⁴Like a hunted gazelle,
or like sheep with no one to gather them,
all will turn to their own people,
and all will flee to their own lands.
¹⁵Whoever is found will be thrust through,
and whoever is caught will fall by the sword.
¹⁶Their infants will be dashed to pieces
before their eyes;
their houses will be plundered,
and their wives ravished.**

Speaking in terms of cosmic cataclysm is typical of poetry that describes the day of YHWH’s judgment. The New Testament continues this tradition (see Matthew 24:29; Luke 21:11).

Babylon will fall

The general statement of God's universal judgment is now applied to Babylon. Just as God raised up Assyria to punish Israel, so God raises up the Medes to attack Babylon. It is this reference that suggests that this poem was composed c.550, at a time when Cyrus II of Persia was already proving victorious in parts of the crumbling Babylonian Empire, but before he had subdued the Medes.

**¹⁷See, I am stirring up the Medes against them,
who have no regard for silver
and do not delight in gold.**

**¹⁸Their bows will slaughter the young men;
they will have no mercy on the fruit of the womb;
their eyes will not pity children.**

**¹⁹And Babylon, the glory of kingdoms,
the splendor and pride of the Chaldeans,
will be like Sodom and Gomorrah
when God overthrew them.**

**²⁰It will never be inhabited
or lived in for all generations;
Arabs will not pitch their tents there,
shepherds will not make their flocks lie down there.**

**²¹But wild animals will lie down there,
and its houses will be full of howling creatures;
there ostriches will live,
and there goat-demons will dance.**

**²²Hyenas will cry in its towers,
and jackals in the pleasant palaces;
its time is close at hand,
and its days will not be prolonged.**

Editorial Comment (14:1-2)

The anticipated fall of Babylon (13:22) will mean the end of subjection and exile. YHWH will have compassion (rāham) on his people, and will renew his choice of them (having rejected them as demonstrated by the catastrophe of 586).

¹But YHWH will have compassion on Jacob and will again choose Israel, and will set them in their own land; and aliens will join them and attach themselves to the house of Jacob. ²And the nations will take them and bring them to their place, and the house of Israel will possess the nations as male and female slaves in YHWH's land; they will take captive those who were their captors, and rule over those who oppressed them.

YHWH will settle them once again in the Promised Land. Foreigners who were his instruments in emptying them out of the land will be his instruments in taking them back to their home. Some of these will be present in the land as slaves (no longer as masters). Some will even want to join them and belong to God's chosen people. According to Ezra this will require that they reject all forms of idolatry (see Ezra 6:21). According to the Priestly School, it will require circumcision (see Exodus 12:48-49).

The King of Babylon in the Underworld (14:3-23)

The introductory lines (14:3-4) and the concluding ones 14:22-23) apply the poem to Babylon.

³When YHWH has given you rest from your pain and turmoil and the hard service with which you were made to serve, ⁴you will take up this taunt against the king of Babylon:

‘Hard service’ is an expression used in relation to the condition of the slaves in Egypt (see Exodus 1:14; 6:9; Deuteronomy 26:6), thus linking the exile experience with the experience of their ancestors. YHWH who defeated the Pharaoh and so led his people to the Promised Land is repeating his saving intervention for the exiles in Babylon. ‘Taunt’ translates the Hebrew *māšāl*. The rhythm of the poem is that of a lament or dirge (the *qînâ*).

How the oppressor has ceased!

How his insolence has ceased!

**⁵YHWH has broken the staff of the wicked,
the sceptre of rulers,**

**⁶that struck down the peoples in wrath
with unceasing blows,
that ruled the nations in anger
with unrelenting persecution.**

**⁷The whole earth is at rest and quiet;
they break forth into singing.**

**⁸The cypresses exult over you,
the cedars of Lebanon, saying,
“Since you were laid low,
no one comes to cut us down.”**

**⁹Sheol beneath is stirred up
to meet you when you come;
it rouses the shades to greet you,
all who were leaders of the earth;
it raises from their thrones
all who were kings of the nations.**

**¹⁰All of them will speak
and say to you:
“You too have become as weak as we!
You have become like us!”**

**¹¹Your pomp is brought down to Sheol,
and the sound of your harps;
maggots are the bed beneath you,
and worms are your covering.**

The only companions of this once powerful king are the shades (*rēpā’îm*) of the Underworld. His only throne is maggots and he is clothed in worms.

How the mighty have fallen

**¹²How you are fallen from heaven,
O Daystar, son of Dawn!**

The 'daystar' (hêlêl) is the planet Venus whose brilliant light vanishes when challenged by the rising sun. Hêlêl was translated in the Latin Vulgate as Lucifer. He is drawing on the myth of the fall of rebellious gods. The New Testament draws upon the same mythical imagery when speaking of the fallen angels:

I watched Satan fall from heaven like a flash of lightning

– Luke 10:18 (also see 10:15) .

God did not spare the angels when they sinned, but cast them into hell
and committed them to chains of deepest darkness to be kept until the judgment.

– 2Peter 2:4

**How you are cut down to the ground,
you who laid the nations low!**

**¹³You said in your heart,
“I will ascend to heaven;**

**I will raise my throne
above the stars of God;**

**I will sit on the mount of assembly
on the heights of Zaphon;**

**¹⁴I will ascend to the tops of the clouds,
I will make myself like the Most High.”**

**¹⁵But you are brought down to Sheol,
to the depths of the Pit.**

In his pride he thought to challenge the high god (’êl ’elyôn) on the mythical north mountain (šāpôn) where the gods assembled. He has been cast down to the Underworld.

**¹⁶Those who see you will stare at you,
and ponder over you:**

**“Is this the man who made the earth tremble,
who shook kingdoms,**

**¹⁷who made the world like a desert
and overthrew its cities,
who would not let his prisoners go home?”**

**¹⁸All the kings of the nations lie in glory,
each in his own tomb;**

**¹⁹but you are cast out, away from your grave,
like loathsome carrion,
clothed with the dead, those pierced by the sword,
who go down to the stones of the Pit,
like a corpse trampled underfoot.**

**²⁰You will not be joined with them in burial,
because you have destroyed your land,
you have killed your people.**

Denial of proper burial is the final humiliation and disgrace.

²⁰May the descendants of evildoers
nevermore be named!

²¹Prepare slaughter for his sons
because of the guilt of their father.
Let them never rise to possess the earth
or cover the face of the world with cities.

His death is the end of his family line. No descendants will survive him. His name will be eternally obliterated.

²²I will rise up against them, says YHWH of hosts, and will cut off from Babylon name and remnant, offspring and posterity, says YHWH. ²³And I will make it a possession of the hedgehog, and swamps, and I will sweep it with the broom of destruction, says YHWH of hosts.

The end of Imperial Assyria (14:24-27)

This short passage highlights a central theme of the editors of the Isaiah scroll. The word of God spoken through Isaiah in the context of Assyrian domination (see already Isaiah 10:12-27) applies also to Babylon (as events leading up to 539 demonstrate). The prophet-scribes want to go further, for YHWH's plans 'concern the whole earth' and 'all nations', and it is YHWH's designs that will prevail. Any power attempting dominion without regard for YHWH's will for justice is doomed to come to the same end as Assyria and Babylon (13:1 - 14:23).

²⁴YHWH of hosts has sworn:

As I have designed,
so shall it be;
and as I have planned,
so shall it come to pass:

²⁵I will break the Assyrian in my land,
and on my mountains trample him under foot;
his yoke shall be removed from them,
and his burden from their shoulders.

²⁶This is the plan that is planned
concerning the whole earth;
and this is the hand that is stretched out
over all the nations.

²⁷For YHWH of hosts has planned,
and who will annul it?
His hand is stretched out,
and who will turn it back?

On YHWH's plans and designs see already 5:12, 19. On the yoke of imperial oppression, see already 9:4; 10:27. On YHWH's hand outstretched to save or to punish, see already the refrain 5:25; 9:7 – 10:4. The following verse refers to 'the year that King Ahaz died'(14:28). In the light of 6:1, the compilers of the scroll want us to see 14:27 as bringing to a close Isaiah's prophetic ministry during the reign of Ahaz and to move on to the reign of Hezekiah.

28In the year that King Ahaz died this oracle came:

The chronology of the kings of Judah in the latter part of the eighth century is uncertain because of the lack of agreement among the sources. One date suggested for Ahaz's death is 727. If this is correct, Ahaz's death coincided with the death of the Assyrian tyrant, Tiglath-pileser III, in which case the compilers of the Isaiah scroll are linking this oracle with that date. On the other hand it seems more likely that Ahaz died somewhere closer to 715. Perhaps the editors, organising the scroll probably more than two centuries after the time of Isaiah, simply wished to mark a transition from the period of Ahaz to that of his son, Hezekiah. The oracle may have originally been given when Sargon II was killed in battle in 705.

Even when we can with some confidence place an oracle such as this in its historical context, this does not mean that the whole oracle fits. We must always take into consideration the reshaping of Isaiah's words by later editors in their attempt to connect Isaiah's words with their own circumstances. For them God's words are alive and active and can and should be listened to by later generations, for they hold a key to understanding God's will for them.

**29Do not rejoice, all you Philistines,
that the rod that struck you is broken,
for from the root of the snake will come forth an adder,
and its fruit will be a flying fiery serpent.**

The 'fiery serpent' is the *śārāp* – a reference to the fiery serpents that attacked the Israelites during their wilderness journey (see Numbers 21:4-9).

**30The poor will graze *their flocks in my pastures,*
and the needy lie down in safety;
but I will make your root die of famine,
and your remnant I will kill.**

The Philistines made inroads into Judah's territory during the reign of Ahaz (see 2Chronicles 28:18).

**31Wail, O gate; cry, O city;
melt in fear, O Philistia, all of you!
For smoke comes out of the north,
and there is no straggler in its ranks.**

**32What will one answer the messengers of the nation?
"YHWH has founded Zion,
and the needy among his people
will find refuge in her."**

Imagine how this verse would have been read by those who returned to Judah from exile in Babylon.

Moab (15:1 – 16:14)

¹An oracle concerning Moab.

Because Ar is laid waste in a night,
 Moab is undone;
 because Kir is laid waste in a night,
 Moab is undone.

If 'Ar' is read as 'îr ('city') the reference may be to Dibon (15:2), the capital city of Moab. Kir (qîr) means 'wall', and so perhaps has the same reference. This lament may be referring to a devastating earthquake and the refugees resulting from it.

²Dibon has gone up to the temple,
 to the high places to weep;
 over Nebo and over Medeba
 Moab wails.

On every head is baldness,
 every beard is shorn;

³in the streets they bind on sackcloth;
 on the housetops and in the squares
 everyone wails and melts in tears.

⁴Heshbon and Elealeh cry out,
 their voices are heard as far as Jahaz;
 therefore the loins of Moab quiver;
 his soul trembles.

⁵My heart cries out for Moab;
 his fugitives flee to Zoar,
 to Eglath-sheleshiah.

For at the ascent of Luhith
 they go up weeping;
 on the road to Horonaim
 they raise a cry of destruction;

⁶the waters of Nimrim
 are a desolation;
 the grass is withered, the new growth fails,
 the verdure is no more.

⁷Therefore the abundance they have gained
 and what they have laid up
 they carry away
 over the Wadi of the Willows.

⁸For a cry has gone
 around the land of Moab;
 the wailing reaches to Eglaim,
 the wailing reaches to Beer-elim.

Moab

**⁹For the waters of Dibon are full of blood;
yet I will bring upon Dibon even more—
a lion for those of Moab who escape,
for the remnant of the land.**

Verse nine ends the lament with a threat of worse things to come (see 16:6-11)

Two inserts (16:1-5)

The text of the first insert (16:1-4a) is damaged. It seems to be referring to a Moabite mission to Judah requesting asylum for refugees from Moab.

**¹Send lambs
to the ruler of the land,
from Sela, by way of the desert,
to the mount of daughter Zion.**

**²Like fluttering birds,
like scattered nestlings,
so are the daughters of Moab
at the fords of the Arnon.**

**³Give counsel,
grant justice;
make your shade like night
at the height of noon;
hide the outcasts,
do not betray the fugitive;**

**⁴let the outcasts of Moab
settle among you;
be a refuge to them
from the destroyer."**

The second insert (16:4b-5) seems not to relate to the context, but to be an expression of hope that Judah's dynasty will be restored.

**⁴When the oppressor is no more,
and destruction has ceased,
and marauders have vanished from the land,
⁵then a throne shall be established in steadfast love
in the tent of David,
and on it shall sit in faithfulness
a ruler who seeks justice
and is swift to do what is right.**

Proud Moab is devastated (16:6-11)

**⁶We have heard of the pride of Moab
—how proud he is!—
of his arrogance, his pride, and his insolence;
his boasts are false.**

- ⁷Therefore let Moab wail,
 let everyone wail for Moab.
 Mourn, utterly stricken,
 for the raisin-cakes of Kir-hareseth.
- ⁸For the fields of Heshbon languish,
 and the vines of Sibmah,
 whose clusters once made drunk
 the lords of the nations,
 reached to Jazer
 and strayed to the desert;
 their shoots once spread abroad
 and crossed over the sea.
- ⁹Therefore I weep with the weeping of Jazer
 for the vines of Sibmah;
 I drench you with my tears,
 O Heshbon and Elealeh;
 for the shout over your fruit harvest
 and your grain harvest has ceased.
- ¹⁰Joy and gladness are taken away
 from the fruitful field;
 and in the vineyards no songs are sung,
 no shouts are raised;
 no treader treads out wine in the presses;
 the vintage-shout is hushed.
- ¹¹Therefore my heart throbs like a harp for Moab,
 and my very soul for Kir-heres.

Prose additions (16:12-14)

The following prose additions round off the laments. Verse twelve states that Moabite cult is without value. Verse thirteen identifies YHWH as the one who is behind Moab's devastation. Verse fourteen appears to come from the final edition of the scroll, composed at a time when Moab is once again prospering and when relations between post-exilic Judah and Moab are not good. The author adds a prediction that the situation will not stay that way for long.

¹²**When Moab presents himself, when he wearies himself upon the high place, when he comes to his sanctuary to pray, he will not prevail.**

¹³**This was the word that YHWH spoke concerning Moab in the past.**

¹⁴**But now YHWH says, In three years, like the years of a hired worker, the glory of Moab will be brought into contempt, in spite of all its great multitude; and those who survive will be very few and feeble.**

Syria and Israel (17:1-3)

The linking of Syria and Israel points to the situation in 732 when they combined to try to force Judah to join the anti-Assyrian alliance. This piece could come from sayings of Isaiah at that time. Those responsible for compiling the Isaiah scroll may have placed it here rather than in chapters 7-9 to reinforce the point that what Isaiah was inspired to say at that time functions as a paradigm to understand God's intentions in subsequent situations.

¹An oracle concerning Damascus.

**See, Damascus will cease to be a city,
and will become a heap of ruins.**

**²Her towns will be deserted forever;
they will be places for flocks,
which will lie down, and no one will make them afraid.**

**³The fortress will disappear from Ephraim,
and the kingdom from Damascus;
and the remnant of Aram will be
like the glory of the children of Israel, says YHWH of hosts.**

Israel (17:4-6)

The expression 'on that day' which we find at the beginning of verses four, seven and nine is an editorial sign that we are dealing with added comments. The word 'glory' (kābôd) is the link between this and the previous oracle. Like Syria, Israel will be devastated. Does this saying come from the period between 732 and the fall of Samaria in 722?

**⁴On that day
the glory of Jacob will be brought low,
and the fat of his flesh will grow lean.
⁵And it shall be as when reapers gather standing grain
and their arms harvest the ears,
and as when one gleanes the ears of grain
in the Valley of Rephaim.
⁶Gleanings will be left in it,
as when an olive tree is beaten—
two or three berries
in the top of the highest bough,
four or five
on the branches of a fruit tree, says YHWH God of Israel.**

Further comments (17:7-11)

⁷On that day people will regard their Maker, and their eyes will look to the Holy One of Israel; ⁸they will not have regard for the altars, the work of their hands, and they will not look to what their own fingers have made, either the sacred poles or the altars of incense.

This is added to explain that Israel was punished because of idolatry.

⁹On that day their strong cities will be like the deserted places of the Hivites and the Amorites, which they deserted because of the children of Israel, and there will be desolation.

Just as in the beginning Israel devastated the cities of the Hivites and Amorites in Canaan, so, in their turn, the cities of Israel will be devastated (by the Assyrian army).

Verses ten to eleven appear to be a late addition. They highlight the sin of idolatry, and are addressed to the devotees of non-Yahwist cults, probably including that to the vegetation god, Adonis (Na‘aman, the ‘pleasant one’, 17:10) – a cult that found its way into Greece and Rome. Those who indulge in this cult will be like the flowers at the cult shrine. They will quickly wither.

**¹⁰For you have forgotten the God of your salvation,
and have not remembered the Rock of your refuge;
therefore, though you plant pleasant plants
and set out slips of an alien god,
¹¹though you make them grow on the day that you plant them,
and make them blossom in the morning that you sow;
yet the harvest will flee away
in a day of grief and incurable pain.**

In the second century BC, the oracle against Syria would have been read as a coded message referring to the Seleucid forces that oppressed Judah, and would have been heard as a call to fidelity to YHWH.

Judah’s enemies will not prevail (17:12-14)

In the middle of this section that speaks of Judah’s enemies comes this profound cry of faith, that, no matter who tries to oppress God’s people, they will fail. The general nature of the imagery makes it impossible to locate it in any specific situation, and there is no need to attempt to do so. It is a cry that anyone could make at any time, for it is, in the final analysis, a cry of faith in YHWH, and it transcends any historical situation.

**¹²Ah, the thunder of many peoples,
they thunder like the thundering of the sea!
Ah, the roar of nations,
they roar like the roaring of mighty waters!
¹³The nations roar like the roaring of many waters,
but he will rebuke them, and they will flee far away,
chased like chaff on the mountains before the wind
and whirling dust before the storm.
¹⁴At evening time, lo, terror!
Before morning, they are no more.
This is the fate of those who despoil us,
and the lot of those who plunder us.**

Against an alliance with Egypt (18:1-6)

At the close of the eighth century BC the Pharaoh of Egypt was from Nubia (kûš, 18:1), an area centred on Upper (southern) Egypt and including Ethiopia and northern Sudan. It was only with the death of Sargon II in 605 that the Pharaoh showed interest in an anti-Assyrian alliance. Not surprisingly Isaiah continues to advise Judah not to get involved (compare his words to Ahaz in 732). As it turned out Hezekiah ignored his advice with the disastrous result that when the Assyrian army defeated Egypt, it also devastated Judah. Only Jerusalem was spared, probably because Hezekiah surrendered and agreed to a massive tribute (though the Bible record offers other ‘explanations’ as well).

**¹Ah, land of whirring wings
beyond the rivers of *Nubia*,
²sending ambassadors by the Nile
in vessels of papyrus on the waters!
Go, you swift messengers,
to a nation tall and smooth,
to a people feared near and far,
a nation mighty and conquering,
whose land the rivers divide.**

It appears that Judah is sending a delegation to the Pharaoh. Isaiah is being sarcastic. His point is that Egypt is a weak reed on which to lean. As the following lines state, the court in Judah should listen rather to YHWH who is telling them that Egypt will be a carcass for birds of prey and the wild animals.

**³All you inhabitants of the world,
you who live on the earth,
when a signal is raised on the mountains, look!
When a trumpet is blown, listen!**

⁴For thus YHWH said to me:

**I will quietly look from my dwelling
like clear heat in sunshine,
like a cloud of dew in the heat of harvest.**

**⁵For before the harvest, when the blossom is over
and the flower becomes a ripening grape,
he will cut off the shoots with pruning hooks,
and the spreading branches he will hew away.**

**⁶They shall all be left
to the birds of prey of the mountains
and to the *wild* animals.
And the birds of prey will *feed on* them in summer,
and all the *wild* animals in winter.**

Comment (18:7)

A later editor picks up the language of 18:2 to speak of a time when people from Nubia will come to Jerusalem bringing gifts (compare 2:3; 14:1). This universalist theme recurs throughout the Isaiah scroll.

⁷At that time gifts will be brought to YHWH of hosts from a people tall and smooth, from a people feared near and far, a nation mighty and conquering, whose land the rivers divide, to Mount Zion, the place of the name of YHWH of hosts.

Egypt (19:1-15)

Similar anti-Egyptian oracles are found in Jeremiah 46 and Ezekiel 29-32.

¹An oracle concerning Egypt.

**See, YHWH is riding on a swift cloud
and comes to Egypt;
the idols of Egypt will tremble at his presence,
and the heart of the Egyptians will melt within them.**

This imagery is borrowed from that used of Baal the Canaanite storm god, and recurs in the psalms (68:4; 18:10; 104:3). The Egyptian gods lose heart, and so do the people.

**²I will stir up Egyptians against Egyptians,
and they will fight, one against the other,
neighbour against neighbour,
city against city, kingdom against kingdom;**

This description fits well the situation during Isaiah's lifetime when civil war between Upper (south) and Lower (north) Egypt led to the establishment of the 25th (Nubian) dynasty.

**³the spirit of the Egyptians within them will be emptied out,
and I will confound their plans;
they will consult the idols and the spirits of the dead
and the ghosts and the familiar spirits;**

**⁴I will deliver the Egyptians
into the hand of a hard master;
a fierce king will rule over them,
says the Sovereign, YHWH of hosts.**

The following stanza describes the effects of the failure of the annual flooding of the Nile.

**⁵The waters of the Nile will be dried up,
and the river will be parched and dry;
⁶its canals will become foul,
and the branches of Egypt's Nile will diminish and dry up,
reeds and rushes will rot away.
⁷There will be bare places by the Nile,
on the brink of the Nile;
and all that is sown by the Nile will dry up,
be driven away, and be no more.**

Egypt

- ⁸Those who fish will mourn;
all who cast hooks in the Nile will lament,
and those who spread nets on the water will languish.**
- ⁹The workers in flax will be in despair,
and the carders and those at the loom will grow pale.**
- ¹⁰Its weavers will be dismayed,
and all who work for wages will be grieved.**

The following stanza recalls the failure of Pharaoh's 'wise men' in their confrontation with Moses (see Exodus 7:8 – 11:10). 'Zoan' (19:11), in the northwest delta, is also known as Tanis (see the Greek Septuagint Version). 'Memphis' (19:13, follows the Septuagint Version; the Hebrew is *nōp*) is the capital of Lower Egypt (near today's Cairo).

- ¹¹The princes of Zoan are utterly foolish;
the wise counselors of Pharaoh give stupid counsel.
How can you say to Pharaoh,
"I am one of the sages,
a descendant of ancient kings"?**
- ¹²Where now are your sages?
Let them tell you and make known
what YHWH of hosts has planned against Egypt.**
- ¹³The princes of Zoan have become fools,
and the princes of Memphis are deluded;
those who are the cornerstones of its tribes
have led Egypt astray.**
- ¹⁴YHWH has poured into them
a spirit of confusion;
and they have made Egypt stagger in all its doings
as a drunkard staggers around in vomit.**

It is typical of the thinking of the Older Testament to conclude that, if people are unwise, this must be something that God is determining for his own purposes.

- ¹⁵Neither head nor tail, palm branch or reed,
will be able to do anything for Egypt.**

Five added comments (19:16-25)

**¹⁶On that day the Egyptians will be like women, and tremble with fear
before the hand that YHWH of hosts raises against them. ¹⁷And the land of
Judah will become a terror to the Egyptians; everyone to whom it is men-
tioned will fear because of the plan that YHWH of hosts is planning against
them.**

The language here is close to that of 19:1-15, and this prose comment may have originally been composed as a conclusion to this section. The only connection in the following comments is that they refer to Egypt.

¹⁸On that day there will be five cities in the land of Egypt that speak the language of Canaan and swear allegiance to YHWH of hosts. One of these will be called the City of the Sun.

As it happens, the Jeremiah scroll speaks of five centres of Jewish population in Egypt. Two are in the delta: Tahpanhes (Jeremiah 2:16; 43:7; 44:1), and Migdol (Jeremiah 44:1; 46:14). Two are in Lower Egypt: Memphis (Jeremiah 44:1; see Isaiah 19:13) and Heliopolis (Jeremiah 43:13; the ‘city of the sun’ in our present text). When the high priest, Onias IV, was banished from Jerusalem c.160BC he built a temple at Heliopolis. The fifth, Pathros, is located in Upper Egypt (Jeremiah 44:1, 15). We know that there was a strong Jewish community also on the island of Elephantine (in Upper Egypt) with a temple constructed before 525BC.

The author of verse eighteen is contemplating the spread throughout Egypt of the Jewish diaspora and their language (called here ‘the language of Canaan’), and so of their cult of YHWH. Yet another example of the universalist theme in the Isaiah scroll.

The following comment speaks of a time when Egypt was weak. The reference may be late and refer to the defeat of the Ptolemies by the Seleucids in 198BC. The missionary and universalist perspective is illustrated in the vision of YHWH hearing the cry of oppressed Egypt and sending a saviour to deliver them. This is the language of Exodus when speaking of the delivering of God’s people *from* Egypt.

¹⁹On that day there will be an altar to YHWH in the center of the land of Egypt, and a pillar to YHWH at its border. ²⁰It will be a sign and a witness to YHWH of hosts in the land of Egypt; when they cry to YHWH because of oppressors, he will send them a saviour, and will defend and deliver them. ²¹YHWH will make himself known to the Egyptians; and the Egyptians will know YHWH on that day, and will worship with sacrifice and burnt offering, and they will make vows to YHWH and perform them. ²²YHWH will strike Egypt, striking and healing; they will return to YHWH, and he will listen to their supplications and heal them.

²³On that day there will be a highway from Egypt to Assyria, and the Assyrian will come into Egypt, and the Egyptian into Assyria, and the Egyptians will worship with the Assyrians.

It is interesting to think of how verse twenty-three would have been read during the period of Greek control. Were they hoping that Judah would be the centre of YHWH worship, joining Assyria (read the Seleucids) and Egypt (read the Ptolemies)? This vision continues in the final comment which follows.

²⁴On that day Israel will be the third with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing in the midst of the earth, ²⁵whom YHWH of hosts has blessed, saying, “Blessed be Egypt my people, and Assyria the work of my hands, and Israel my heritage.”

So extraordinary was this final text found that we find it ‘watered down’ in the Greek and Aramaic Versions.

Different readings of Isaiah 19:25

1. Hebrew [MT]

Blessed be Egypt my people,
and Assyria the work of my hands,
and Israel my heritage.

2. Greek [LXX: Septuagint] concludes with:

Blessed be my people who are in Egypt,
and who are in Assyria,
and Israel my heritage.

3. Aramaic Targum

Blessed be my people whom I brought out of Egypt. Because they sinned before me I carried them into exile to Assyria, but now that they have repented, they shall be called My People, and My Inheritance, even Israel.

Against the forming of an anti-Assyrian alliance (20:1-6)

This is yet another account of Isaiah attempting to persuade the decision-makers in Jerusalem not to get caught up in alliances. This time it involves Isaiah parading as a prisoner of war. Examples of this kind of ‘street theatre’ are found also in Jeremiah 27:1 – 28:17, and especially in Ezekiel (see 4:1-17; 5:1-4 and 12:1-7). In spite of the fact that Assyria had already in 711 put down a rebellion organised by the ruler of Ashdod, there were still rumblings about the forming of an anti-Assyrian alliance which included Egypt and Upper Egypt (‘Nubia’, kûš). Once again Isaiah’s advice went unheeded. In 705 Hezekiah played a leading role in getting together an anti-Assyrian alliance. Assyria attacked and defeated Egypt and in the process devastated Judah.

¹In the year that the commander-in-chief, who was sent by King Sargon of Assyria, came to Ashdod and fought against it and took it – ²at that time YHWH had spoken to Isaiah son of Amoz, saying, “Go, and loose the sackcloth from your loins and take your sandals off your feet,” and he had done so, walking naked and barefoot. ³Then YHWH said, “Just as my servant Isaiah has walked naked and barefoot for three years as a sign and a portent against Egypt and Nubia, ⁴so shall the king of Assyria lead away the Egyptians as captives and the Nubians as exiles, both the young and the old, naked and barefoot, with buttocks uncovered, to the shame of Egypt. ⁵And they shall be dismayed and confounded because of Ethiopia their hope and of Egypt their boast. ⁶In that day the inhabitants of this coastland will say, ‘See, this is what has happened to those in whom we hoped and to whom we fled for help and deliverance from the king of Assyria! And we, how shall we escape?’”

The Fall of Babylon (21:1-10)

¹The oracle concerning the wilderness of the sea.

'Wilderness of the sea' seems to be a reference to the marshy delta of the Tigris and Euphrates in southern Mesopotamia.

**As whirlwinds in the Negeb sweep on,
it comes from the desert,
from a terrible land.**

**²A stern vision is told to me;
the betrayer betrays,
and the destroyer destroys.**

**Go up, O Elam,
lay siege, O Media;
all the sighing she has caused
I bring to an end.**

It is likely that there were soldiers from Elam and Media taking part in Cyrus's occupation of Babylon in 539.

**³Therefore my loins are filled with anguish;
pangs have seized me,
like the pangs of a woman in labor;
I am bowed down so that I cannot hear,
I am dismayed so that I cannot see.**

**⁴My mind reels, horror has appalled me;
the twilight I longed for
has been turned for me into trembling.**

Twilight is expected to bring a pleasant evening breeze, and relief from the heat.

**⁵They prepare the table,
they spread the rugs,
they eat, they drink.**

The Babylonians are pictured as feasting, with no idea of the impending doom.

**Rise up, commanders,
oil the shield!**

⁶For thus the Lord said to me:

**"Go, post a lookout,
let him announce what he sees.**

**⁷When he sees riders, horsemen in pairs,
riders on donkeys, riders on camels,
let him listen diligently,
very diligently."**

⁸Then the watchman called out:

**“Upon a watchtower I stand, O Lord,
continually by day,
and at my post I am stationed
throughout the night.**

**⁹Look, there they come, riders,
horsemen in pairs!”**

Then he responded,

**“Fallen, fallen is Babylon;
and all the images of her gods
lie shattered on the ground.”**

**¹⁰O my threshed and winnowed one,
what I have heard from YHWH of hosts,
the God of Israel, I announce to you.**

In the final verse, the terrible end of Babylon arouses the sympathy of the poet. Either that, or he switches focus and his heart goes out to his own people who have suffered so much at Babylon's hands.

Oracles about the Arab Peoples (21:11-17)

¹¹The oracle concerning Dumah.

‘Dumah’ (dûmâ) may refer to Edom (‘êdôm), which is how the Septuagint translates it. dûmâ also means ‘silence’, so it may be a poetic allusion to the realm of the dead. ‘Seir’ is a mountainous region of Edom, southeast of the Dead Sea.

**One is calling to me from Seir,
“Sentinel, what of the night?
Sentinel, what of the night?”**

¹²The sentinel says:

**“Morning comes, *but it is still* night.
If you will inquire, inquire;
come back again.”**

¹³The oracle concerning the desert plain.

**In the scrub of the desert plain you will lodge,
O caravans of Dedanites.**

**¹⁴Bring water to the thirsty,
meet the fugitive with bread,
O inhabitants of the land of Tema.**

**¹⁵For they have fled from the swords,
from the drawn sword,
from the bent bow,
and from the stress of battle.**

The ‘desert plain’ is Arabia. Dedan and Tema in northern Arabia were the main centres on the trade route linking the Mediterranean with the Persian Gulf. It appears that these centres are being ransacked by the neighbouring Bedouin tribes of Kedar.

¹⁶For thus the Lord said to me: Within a year, according to the years of a hired worker, all the glory of Kedar will come to an end; ¹⁷and the remaining bows of Kedar's warriors will be few; for YHWH, the God of Israel, has spoken.

There are obvious links between this editorial comment and that in 16:13-14.

Lament over Jerusalem (22:1-14)

¹The oracle concerning the valley of vision.

This lament is directed to Jerusalem. The editorial title is taken from verse five. The reference may be to the Valley of Jehoshaphat (see Joel 3:2,12). The most likely setting for this oracle is Sennacherib's devastation of Judah in 701. He claims to have destroyed 46 towns and deported over 200,000 people. Jerusalem somehow survived. Because poems like this were re-used in later circumstances, some of the verses may have been updated to refer to the siege of Jerusalem in 598 and its destruction in 586.

**What do you mean that you have gone up,
all of you, to the housetops,**

**²you that are full of shoutings,
tumultuous city, exultant town?**

**Your slain are not slain by the sword,
nor are they dead in battle.**

**³Your rulers have all fled together;
they were captured without the use of a bow.**

**All of you who were found were captured,
though they had fled far away.**

⁴Therefore I said:

**Look away from me,
let me weep bitter tears;
do not try to comfort me
for the destruction of my beloved people.**

**⁵For the Lord YHWH of hosts has a day
of tumult and trampling and confusion
in the valley of vision,
a battering down of walls
and a cry for help to the mountains.**

**⁶Elam bore the quiver
with chariots and cavalry,
and Kir uncovered the shield.**

**⁷Your choicest valleys were full of chariots,
and the cavalry took their stand at the gates.**

⁸He has taken away the covering of Judah.

The Babylonians used soldiers from Elam for their skill as archers. 'Kir' is probably in southern Mesopotamia (see Amos 1:5; 9:7; 2Kings 16:9). Jerusalem's plight is explained by YHWH withdrawing his protection and leaving it to its deserved fate.

⁸On that day you looked to the weapons of the House of the Forest, ⁹and you saw that there were many breaches in the city of David, and you collected the waters of the lower pool. ¹⁰You counted the houses of Jerusalem, and you broke down the houses to fortify the wall. ¹¹You made a reservoir between the two walls for the water of the old pool.

Hezekiah was responsible for the strengthening of Jerusalem's defences. The 'House of the Forest' was so called because of its cedar supports (1Kings 7:2-5; 10:17). He walled in the western hill (2Chronicles 32:5). The refugees from Israel in 721 had considerably swelled the population of Jerusalem. The Siloam tunnel diverted the water from the Spring of Gihon under the wall and into the city (2Kings 20:20; 2Chronicles 32:3-4, 30). All this preparation was done, but ...

**¹¹But you did not look to him who did it,
or have regard for him who planned it long ago.**

**¹²In that day the Lord YHWH of hosts
called to weeping and mourning,
to baldness and putting on sackcloth;**

**¹³but instead there was joy and festivity,
killing oxen and slaughtering sheep,
eating meat and drinking wine.**

**"Let us eat and drink,
for tomorrow we die."**

Paul quotes this saying in 1Corinthians 15:32.

**¹⁴YHWH of hosts has revealed himself in my ears:
Surely this iniquity will not be forgiven you until you die,
says the Lord YHWH of hosts.**

Shebna, Eliakim and a third person, Joah, not mentioned in the following text, were sent as a delegation to the Assyrian camp during the siege of Jerusalem in 701 (see 2Kings 18:18, 26, 37 = Isaiah 36:3, 11, 32). They were also sent to talk with Isaiah (2Kings 19:2 = Isaiah 37:2). Isaiah opposed their pro-Egyptian policy and the rebellion which led to the devastation of Judah in 701.

¹⁵Thus says the Lord YHWH of hosts: Come, go to this steward, to Shebna, who is master of the household, and say to him: ¹⁶What right do you have here? Who are your relatives here, that you have cut out a tomb here for yourself, cutting a tomb on the height, and carving a habitation for yourself in the rock? ¹⁷YHWH is about to hurl you away violently, my fellow. He will seize firm hold on you, ¹⁸whirl you round and round, and throw you like a ball into a wide land; there you shall die, and there your splendid chariots shall lie, O you disgrace to your master's house! ¹⁹I will thrust you from your office, and you will be pulled down from your post.

Shebna is using his position to build an expensive tomb in the Kidron Valley. Isaiah is telling him that he will be demoted and will die in a foreign land. So much for the tomb. Now Eliakim's investiture is described in all its splendour. His position in the administration of Jerusalem and Judah compares with that of Joseph in Egypt (Genesis 39:41-44). Verse twenty-two is quoted in the New Testament Book of Revelation 3:7. Eliakim's dignity and power, too, will come to nothing.

²⁰On that day I will call my servant Eliakim son of Hilkiah, ²¹and will clothe him with your robe and bind your sash on him. I will commit your authority to his hand, and he shall be a father to the inhabitants of Jerusalem and to the house of Judah. ²²I will place on his shoulder the key of the house of David; he shall open, and no one shall shut; he shall shut, and no one shall open. ²³I will fasten him like a peg in a secure place, and he will become a throne of honour to his ancestral house. ²⁴And they will hang on him the whole weight of his ancestral house, the offspring and issue, every small vessel, from the cups to all the flagons.

²⁵On that day, says YHWH of hosts, the peg that was fastened in a secure place will give way; it will be cut down and fall, and the load that was on it will perish, for YHWH has spoken.

Joy at the humiliation of Tyre and Sidon (23:1-18)

Tyre is on the Phoenician coast, half way between Acco and Sidon. In ancient times it was an island, a factor that gave it added security. For centuries it dominated sea trade between the countries of the Mediterranean and the east. Large vessels capable of sailing the open Mediterranean (ships of Tarshish) brought goods from Egypt (Sihor, 23:3), Carthage, Spain and the countries bordering the Aegean to Tyre and returned loaded with merchandise from Arabia, Afghanistan, India, Assyria, and Babylon. Nebuchadrezzar's protracted siege (585-573) failed. It was only Alexander the Great in 332 who was able to conquer the island port (it was restored by Ptolemy II in 274). In the light of the way oracles were re-used and re-applied it is possible that both these sieges played a part in the development of the text.

¹The oracle concerning Tyre.

Wail, O ships of Tarshish,
for your *fortified harbour* is destroyed.

When they came in from Cyprus
they learned of it.

**²Be still, O inhabitants of the coast,
O merchants of Sidon,
your messengers crossed over the sea**

**³and were on the mighty waters;
your revenue was the grain of Shihor,
the harvest of the Nile;
you were the merchant of the nations.**

**⁴Be ashamed, O Sidon, for the sea has spoken,
the fortress of the sea, saying:**

**"I have neither laboured nor given birth,
I have neither reared young men
nor brought up young women."**

**⁵When the report comes to Egypt,
they will be in anguish over the report about Tyre.**

**⁶Cross over to Tarshish—
wail, O inhabitants of the coast!**

**⁷Is this your exultant city
whose origin is from days of old,
whose feet carried her
to settle far away?**

**⁸Who has planned this
against Tyre, the bestower of crowns,
whose merchants were princes,
whose traders were the honored of the earth?**

**⁹YHWH of hosts has planned it—
to defile the pride of all glory,
to shame all the honoured of the earth.**

Typically, pride and arrogance are seen as the reason for YHWH's action.

**¹⁰Cross over to your own land,
O ships of Tarshish;
this is a harbour no more.**

**¹¹He has stretched out his hand over the sea,
he has shaken the kingdoms;
YHWH has given command concerning Canaan
to destroy its fortresses.**

¹²He said:

You will exult no longer,
 O oppressed virgin daughter Sidon;
 rise, cross over to Cyprus —
 even there you will have no rest.

¹³Look at the land of the Chaldeans! This is the people; it was not Assyria.

The text here is damaged. Chaldeans is the name for the inhabitants of Babylon. Is the poet referring to the siege of Nebuchadrezzar?

They destined Tyre for wild animals. They erected their siege towers, they tore down her palaces, they made her a ruin.

¹⁴Wail, O ships of Tarshish,
 for your fortress is destroyed.

Verses fifteen to eighteen are a later addition and comment (compare 16:13-14 and 21:16-17).

¹⁵From that day Tyre will be forgotten for seventy years, the lifetime of one king. At the end of seventy years, it will happen to Tyre as in the song about the prostitute:

¹⁶Take a harp,
 go about the city,
 you forgotten prostitute!
 Make sweet melody,
 sing many songs,
 that you may be remembered.

¹⁷At the end of seventy years, YHWH will visit Tyre, and she will return to her trade, and will prostitute herself with all the kingdoms of the world on the face of the earth. ¹⁸Her merchandise and her wages will be dedicated to YHWH; her profits will not be stored or hoarded, but her merchandise will supply abundant food and fine clothing for those who live in the presence of YHWH.

‘Seventy years’ is, of course, symbolic (‘in the fullness of time’), not chronological. Wealth produced by sea-trade is likened to prostitution. Perhaps it was the fact that Nebuchadrezzar’s siege eventually failed that led to this comment. Verse eighteen dreams of Tyre as providing wealth for a restored Judah.

Introduction to chapters 24-27

The opening verse (24:1) indicates the focus of these chapters, which is on God’s final judgment of evil whatever historical form it may take. This forms a fitting conclusion to a section that has pronounced the divine judgment against the nations that have acted against God’s chosen people. It is a small step to widen the scope of the judgment to speak of God’s judgment of any and every power that proudly acts against his will.

Universal judgment

Brevard Childs in *Isaiah* (The Old Testament Library, Westminster, John Knox Press, 2001 page 173), speaks of chapters 24-27 as ‘divine admonition and encouragement to a community of faith living under great pressure and struggling to discern in its historical experiences the ways of God in human lives.’

The world lies under God’s judgment (24:1-13)

**¹Now YHWH is about to lay waste the earth and make it desolate,
and he will twist its surface and scatter its inhabitants.**

Such a universal judgment has been indicated already:

They come from a distant land,
from the end of the heavens,
YHWH and the weapons of his indignation,
to destroy the whole earth ...
I will punish the world for its evil,
and the wicked for their iniquity;
I will put an end to the pride of the arrogant,
and lay low the insolence of tyrants.

– Isaiah 13:5, 11

All you inhabitants of the world,
you who live on the earth,
when a signal is raised on the mountains, look!
When a trumpet is blown, listen!

– Isaiah 18:3

Babylon continues to be the paradigm. Talk of scattering the inhabitants of the earth (24:1) recalls the story of Babel (Genesis 11:1-9).

**²And it shall be, as with the people, so with the priest;
as with the slave, so with his master;
as with the maid, so with her mistress;
as with the buyer, so with the seller;
as with the lender, so with the borrower;
as with the creditor, so with the debtor.**

**³The earth shall be utterly laid waste and utterly despoiled;
for YHWH has spoken this word.**

**⁴The earth dries up and withers,
the world languishes and withers;
the heavens languish together with the earth.**

**⁵The earth lies polluted
under its inhabitants;
for they have transgressed laws,
violated the statutes,
broken the everlasting covenant.**

‘Everlasting covenant’ (b^orît ‘ôlām) is an expression found in YHWH’s covenant with Noah (see Genesis 9:16). Compare: ‘YHWH saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually’ (Genesis 6:5).

**⁶Therefore a curse devours the earth,
and its inhabitants suffer for their guilt;
therefore the inhabitants of the earth dwindled,
and few people are left.**

This is the reversal of God's original blessing for the human family to 'be fruitful, multiply and fill the earth' (Genesis 9:1). Compare Isaiah 13:12.

**⁷The wine dries up,
the vine languishes,
all the merry-hearted sigh.**

**⁸The mirth of the timbrels is stilled,
the noise of the jubilant has ceased,
the mirth of the lyre is stilled.**

**⁹No longer do they drink wine with singing;
strong drink is bitter to those who drink it.**

¹⁰The city of chaos is broken down,

The word 'chaos' (tōhû) recalls the primeval chaos 'before' God's creative ordering. The 'city' is any and every city, including those that have featured in the last eleven chapters. The primary example is Babylon and the poem may have been composed in the years just before its fall to Cyrus II of Persia (539).

every house is shut up so that no one can enter.

**¹¹There is an outcry in the streets for lack of wine;
all joy has reached its eventide;
the gladness of the earth is banished.**

**¹²Desolation is left in the city,
the gates are battered into ruins.**

**¹³For thus it shall be on the earth
and among the nations,
as when an olive tree is beaten,
as at the gleaning when the grape harvest is ended.**

**¹⁴They lift up their voices, they sing for joy;
they shout from the west over the majesty of YHWH.**

**¹⁵Therefore in the east give glory to YHWH;
in the coastlands of the sea glorify the name of YHWH,
the God of Israel.**

**¹⁶From the ends of the earth we hear songs of praise,
of glory to the Righteous One.**

**But I say, I pine away,
I pine away. Woe is me!**

**For the treacherous deal treacherously,
the treacherous deal very treacherously.**

There is no lack of liturgical celebrations, but a dearth of faithfulness – a theme chosen for inclusion in the opening chapter of the scroll (see Isaiah 1:12-17).

Universal judgment

**¹⁷Terror, and the pit, and the snare
are upon you, O inhabitant of the earth!
¹⁸Whoever flees at the sound of the terror
shall fall into the pit;
and whoever climbs out of the pit
shall be caught in the snare.
For the windows of heaven are opened,
and the foundations of the earth tremble.**

We are meant to recall the primeval flood (Genesis 7:11).

**¹⁹The earth is utterly broken,
the earth is torn asunder,
the earth is violently shaken.
²⁰The earth staggers like a drunkard,
it sways like a hut;**

This picks up the imagery which opened the chapter (see 24:1).

**its transgression lies heavy upon it,
and it falls, and will not rise again.**

The following stanza appears to be a much later addition with themes that belong to the apocalyptic literature that emerged in the second century BC and continued on through the New Testament period and afterwards. This includes the notion of the fall and imprisonment of rebellious heavenly powers (the stars were thought of as living, intelligent beings composed of fire, the most refined element). We find this imagery in the Book of Revelation (9:2, 11).

**²¹On that day YHWH will punish
the host of heaven in heaven,
and on earth the kings of the earth.
²²They will be gathered together
like prisoners in a pit;
they will be shut up in a prison,
and after many days they will be punished.
²³Then 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.**

The punishment of those in heaven and on earth who oppose YHWH is seen as YHWH's action to redeem Judah and Jerusalem – a theme that we have found in the previous chapters (see 14:1-2, 32; 18:7). The final line is an allusion to the scene where God reveals his glory to the elders on Mount Sinai (Exodus 24:9-11).

A Thanksgiving Psalm (25:1-5)

YHWH's redeeming of Judah by bringing about the destruction of the cities that one after another have oppressed God's people is the subject of a psalm of praise and thanksgiving. The city is anonymous, and those chanting the psalm would think of different cities depending on their situation.

**¹YHWH, 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.**

Reference to YHWH's plans is typical of Isaiah (see 9:5; 10:5-19; 14:24-27)

**²For you have made the city a heap,
the fortified city a ruin;**

On the destruction of those hostile to YHWH's plans see 5:14; 13:11. On YHWH's reducing their cities to rubble see 17:1; 23:13.

**the palace of aliens is a city no more,
it will never be rebuilt.**

**³Therefore strong peoples will glorify you;
cities of ruthless nations will fear you.**

The following verse goes to the core of Yahwism's theology.

**⁴For you have been a refuge to the poor,
a refuge to the needy in their distress,
a shelter from the rainstorm and a shade from the heat.
When the blast of the ruthless was like a *flood pounding a wall*,
⁵the noise of aliens like heat in a dry place,
you subdued the heat with the shade of clouds;
the song of the ruthless was stilled.**

We recall the following:

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. It will serve as a pavilion, a shade by day from the heat, and a refuge and a shelter from the storm and rain.

– Isaiah 4:5-6

A feast for all peoples

Communion of all peoples with God (25:6-8)

**⁶On 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.**

**⁷And he will destroy on this mountain
the shroud that is cast over all peoples,
the sheet that is spread over all nations;
he will swallow up death forever.**

**⁸Then the Lord YHWH will wipe away the tears from all faces,
and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth,
for YHWH has spoken.**

After all the talk of YHWH's punishing Judah's enemies, this extraordinary piece is a timely reminder that punishment is always in view of bringing people to acknowledge YHWH and to receive life from him. We are accustomed to hearing this in relation to Israel, but here the prophet is speaking about 'all peoples'(25:6, 7), 'all nations'(25:7), 'all faces'(25:8), 'all the earth'(25:8). The background seems to be a liturgical celebration of the universal lordship of YHWH, probably on the occasion of the pilgrimage festival of Booths (see Zechariah 14:16).

Equally extraordinary is the statement that YHWH will 'swallow up death forever' (quoted by Paul in 1Corinthians 15:54) 'and wipe away the tears from all faces'(quoted in Revelation 7:17; 21:4). We have to wait for the second century BC to find explicit statements of belief in a personal life beyond death, whether it be restricted to the just (see Daniel 12:2), or influenced by the Greek idea of the immortality of the soul (see Wisdom 2:33-34). It is also true that there are many statements in the Hebrew Bible that express the presumption that life, real life, ends with death (see Psalm 88:3-5; Psalm 115:17; Isaiah 38:18-19; Sirach 17:27-28). Our present text may have been composed in the second century BC, but that is not at all certain. It may join other statements in suggesting a much earlier hope that, since God is faithful, there must be more to our communion with God than what we experience this side of the grave.

For you do not give me up to Sheol, or let your faithful one see the Pit.
You show me the path of life. In your presence there is fullness of joy;
in your right hand are pleasures forevermore.

– Psalm 16:9-11

God will ransom my soul from the power of Sheol, for he will receive me.

– Psalm 49:15

I am continually with you; you hold my right hand.
You guide me with your counsel,
and afterward you will receive me with honour.
Whom have I in heaven but you?
And there is nothing on earth that I desire other than you.
My flesh and my heart may fail,
but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.

– Psalm 73:23-26

We will return to this when examining Isaiah 26:19.

A Second Thanksgiving Psalm (25:9-10)

**⁹It will be said on that day,
Lo, this is our God;
we have waited for him, so that he might save us.
This is YHWH for whom we have waited;
let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.
¹⁰For the hand of YHWH will rest on this mountain.**

Against Moab (25:10-12)

Someone added to this song of trust and gratitude the following dreadful statement against the Moabites. Whatever the context, it must rank as one of the most violent and repulsive statements in the Isaiah scroll, already with more than its share of violent images. When we read it we need to hear Jesus say:

You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.

– Matthew 5:43-45

**¹⁰The Moabites shall be trodden down in their place
as straw is trodden down in a dung-pit.
¹¹Though they spread out their hands in the midst of it,
as swimmers spread out their hands to swim,
their pride will be laid low despite the struggle of their hands.
¹²The high fortifications of his walls will be brought down,
laid low, cast to the ground, even to the dust.**

A Third Thanksgiving Psalm (26:1-6)

Here the psalmist reverts to thanking YHWH for reversing the fortunes of Judah by bringing about the downfall of Judah’s oppressors.

**¹On that day this song will be sung in the land of Judah:
We have a strong city;
he sets up victory
like walls and bulwarks.
²Open the gates,
so that the righteous nation that keeps faith
may enter in.
³Those of steadfast mind you keep in peace—
in peace because they trust in you.
⁴Trust in YHWH forever,
for in YH, in YHWH
you have an everlasting rock.**

Keep on believing

**⁵For he has brought low
the inhabitants of the height;
the lofty city he lays low.
He lays it low to the ground,
casts it to the dust.**

**⁶The foot tramples it,
the feet of the poor,
the steps of the needy.**

The poor have been trampled down. Now they trample down their oppressors.

Keep believing: God will intervene (26:7 – 27:1)

**⁷The way of the righteous is level;
O Just One, you make smooth the path of the righteous.**

**⁸In the path of your judgments,
YHWH, we wait for you;
your name and your renown
are the soul's desire.**

YHWH's promises to his people have not yet been realised because YHWH has had to keep on punishing his people, chastising them so that they might learn to be faithful. Judah must continue to wait and to call upon YHWH.

**⁹My soul yearns for you in the night,
my spirit within me earnestly seeks you.
For when your judgments are in the earth,
the inhabitants of the world learn righteousness.**

**¹⁰If favour is shown to the wicked,
they do not learn righteousness;
in the land of uprightness they deal perversely
and do not see the majesty of YHWH.**

**¹¹YHWH, your hand is lifted up,
but they do not see it.
Let them see your zeal for your people, and be ashamed.
Let the fire for your adversaries consume them.**

**¹²YHWH, you will ordain peace for us,
for indeed, all that we have done, you have done for us.**

YHWH has also punished Israel's oppressors, but they have not learned. The psalmist prays that the fire created by the adversaries of Israel – and therefore the adversaries of YHWH ('your adversaries', 26:11) – will turn back on them and consume them (verse eleven is quoted in Hebrews 10:27). YHWH continues to show favour to his people. This is the source of their hope that the promises made to them will, one day, come about, and they will experience 'peace' (26:12).

¹³**YHWH our God,
other lords besides you have ruled over us,
but we acknowledge your name alone.**

¹⁴**The dead do not live;
shades do not rise —
because you have punished and destroyed them,
and wiped out all memory of them.**

Israel's enemies have been destroyed by God and they will never rise again. It is different with Israel. The psalmist goes on to recall the empire of David when YHWH 'enlarged all the borders of the land'.

¹⁵**But you have increased the nation, YHWH,
you have increased the nation; you are glorified;
you have enlarged all the borders of the land.**

He now recalls the punishment that YHWH had to inflict upon Israel.

¹⁶**YHWH, in distress they sought you,
they poured out a prayer
when your chastening was on them.**

¹⁷**Like a woman with child,
who writhes and cries out in her pangs
when she is near her time,
so were we because of you, YHWH;**

¹⁸**we were with child, we writhed,
but we gave birth only to wind.**

**We have won no victories on earth,
and no one is born to inhabit the world.**

¹⁹**Your dead shall live, their corpses shall rise.**

Their suffering is compared to the pangs of a woman in labour. Of themselves YHWH's people can do nothing: they can give birth only to wind. But they are not on their own. YHWH, who has chastised them, is with them, and, unlike their oppressors, their nation will continue to rise from the dead. The return from exile in Babylon was experienced as just such a miraculous rising from the dead.

**O dwellers in the dust, awake and sing for joy!
For your dew is a radiant dew,
and the earth will give birth to those long dead.**

The psalmist is calling on all those who have gone before, and who have lived and died clinging to God's promise, to 'awake and sing for joy', for YHWH will intervene to achieve his design, and Israel will experience the fulfilment of YHWH's promise. Like the earlier statement in 25:7-8, this text is not clear enough to be a witness to belief in a personal afterlife. The poetic form suggests the metaphorical interpretation followed here. However, the Septuagint uses future verbs to translate 'awake and sing for joy'. By the second century belief in a future resurrection and life after death was being expressed by some groups within the Jewish community. The question was still being debated between the Sadducees and Pharisees in the first century AD (see Acts 23:8).

Evil will be destroyed

The psalm concludes with an assurance that YHWH will punish those who have oppressed his people.

**²⁰Come, my people, enter your chambers,
and shut your doors behind you;
hide yourselves for a little while
until the wrath is past.**

**²¹For YHWH comes out from his place
to punish the inhabitants of the earth for their iniquity;
the earth will disclose the blood shed on it,
and will no longer cover its slain.**

Their blood cries out to be avenged, and their cry will be heard. God's promises have not yet come to pass. They must lie low and continue to trust. God will intervene in God's time. We are reminded of God shutting the door of the ark in which Noah is to remain, waiting for the flood to pass (Genesis 7:16). The following comment restates 26:20-21 in mythological terms.

**^{27:1}On that day YHWH with his cruel and great and strong sword will punish
Leviathan the fleeing serpent, Leviathan the twisting serpent, and he will kill
the dragon that is in the sea.**

Primordial chaos, dramatised here by the mythical Leviathan is yet to be finally overcome. God's creative action continues. Israel, God's chosen instrument in revealing YHWH to the world, must learn to be faithful. The day will come when chaos is completely overcome. The New Testament Book of Revelation draws on this imagery to describe the evil power of the Roman state attempting to destroy the young Christian community, just as Assyria and Babylon had attempted to annihilate Israel and Judah. The lesson is the same. We must continue to believe and learn to be faithful.

YHWH's care for Israel (27:2-6)

²On that day:

A pleasant vineyard, sing about it!

**³I, YHWH, am its keeper;
every moment I water it.**

**I guard it night and day
so that no one can harm it;**

⁴I have no wrath.

**If it gives me thorns and briers,
I will march to battle against it.
I will burn it up.**

**⁵Or else let it cling to me for protection,
let it make peace with me, let it make peace with me.**

The expression 'on that day' is used to introduce a comment on the text immediately preceding. This comment is by way of a stark contrast. YHWH will punish Israel's enemies, but is not angry with his vineyard, and will never cease caring for it (compare 5:1-7). He cannot allow 'thorns and briers' to grow, but Israel can always cling to him for protection. YHWH wants only peace (fulness of communion) with his chosen people.

**⁶In days to come Jacob shall take root,
Israel shall blossom and put forth shoots,
and fill the whole world with fruit.**

The Exile was to expiate and purify the people (27:7-11)

Here we have one more attempt to ‘explain’ the disaster of 586 and the exile. The thinking is consistent with a central conviction of the Deuteronomic School in that idolatry is the chief sin that had to be punished and expiated (see Deuteronomy 7:5; 12:13). Isaiah shares this understanding (see Isaiah 2:6-22; 17:7-8).

**⁷Has he struck them down as he struck down those who struck them?
Or have they been killed as their killers were killed?**

**⁸By expulsion, by exile you struggled against them;
with his fierce blast he removed them in the day of the east wind.**

**⁹Therefore by this the guilt of Jacob will be expiated,
and this will be the full fruit of the removal of his sin:
when he makes all the stones of the altars
like chalkstones crushed to pieces,
no sacred poles or incense altars will remain standing.**

The following verses return to another key theme of Isaiah: Jerusalem was destroyed because it failed to trust YHWH. As we were warned (6:9-10), Isaiah prophetic word was not heeded. This had to be punished. Isaiah’s words, commented on and expanded, have been kept so that the same mistake will not recur.

**¹⁰For the fortified city is solitary,
a habitation deserted and forsaken, like the wilderness;
the calves graze there,
there they lie down, and strip its branches.**

**¹¹When its boughs are dry, they are broken;
women come and make a fire of them.
For this is a people without understanding;
therefore he that made them will not have compassion on them,
he that formed them will show them no favour.**

Conclusion to Isaiah 13-27 (27:12-13)

This whole section on judgment (13-27) is rounded off with two concluding comments that promise the gathering back of those dispersed from the land. The last sound we hear is that of the ram’s horn, summoning us, not to battle, but to solemn assembly, to prayer and to ‘worship on the holy mountain at Jerusalem’.

¹²On that day YHWH will thresh from the channel of the Euphrates to the Wadi of Egypt, and you will be gathered one by one, O people of Israel.

¹³And on that day a great trumpet will be blown, and those who were lost in the land of Assyria and those who were driven out to the land of Egypt will come and worship on the holy mountain at Jerusalem.