

ISAIAH 49-55

Introduction to Isaiah 49-55

From the opening words of chapter 49 it is clear that there has been a significant shift of focus. Two things have happened. The first is that Cyrus did not live up to the expectations that the composers of Isaiah 40-48 had of him. Though Cyrus conquered the Babylonian Empire, Judah is still devastated and Jerusalem and its temple are still in ruins. The second is partly a consequence of this: the doubts already expressed by the community have hardened into rejection of this School and of their prophetic message.

Yet the prophet-preachers remain convinced that it is YHWH's will to bring about the return of the exiles and to build up Judah so that the people can carry out the mission that they have inherited from Abraham and Jacob; namely, to reveal YHWH to the nations. Since the people are not in a position yet to do this, and since they are no longer listening to the prophetic message, the members of this exilic School realise that it is they who are called to be YHWH's 'servants', to keep the flame burning and to realise the mission given to Israel. They must, in that sense, *be* Israel.

Their opening words, then, are no longer addressed to the people of Judah, whether in Jerusalem or in exile. They are addressed to the nations, for it is YHWH's will for the nations to come to know him and experience freedom and salvation through following the way of the *tôrâ*, the way YHWH has revealed to Israel, the way that has its source in communion with YHWH and flows into a world order characterised by justice.

In the following quotation Carroll Stuhlmueller in his *New Paths through the Old Testament* (Paulist Press, 1989, page 99) speaks in terms of an individual prophet (the supposed anonymous prophet of the exile referred to as 'Deutero-Isaiah') rather than a School of prophet-preachers. If we substitute 'prophets' for 'prophet', Stuhlmueller captures well the mood of Isaiah 49-55:

A sombre sadness now muffles the enthusiasm. The people could not believe that God's compassion would reach this tenderly to the ends of the earth, nor could the people accept the price of sharing the covenant and its God with other nations. Worst of all, the prophet acclaimed the Persian Cyrus as another Moses in 44:24 - 45:7. Such openness clashed with the narrow prejudice of the people. The prophet was spurned, publicly humiliated, cast aside. In the solitary darkness he saw himself reliving the history of his people in their dreadful suffering. He also sustained hopes beyond despair, life beyond death, absorbed from the tradition of Moses and the earlier prophets.

Once again, the authors claim to be chosen by YHWH to proclaim his word. It is in this spirit of prophecy that they address the peoples of the world.

**¹Listen to me, O coastlands,
pay attention, you peoples from far away!
YHWH called me before I was born,
while I was in my mother's womb he named me.**

Earlier they had said that YHWH called Cyrus by name (45: 3,4; 48:15). They have come to see that they themselves must be the ones to declare YHWH's design for the nations, and through his prophetic word to be his instruments in bringing it about.

**²He made my mouth like a sharp sword,
in the shadow of his hand he hid me;
he made me a *sharpened* arrow,
in his quiver he hid me away.**

**³And he said to me, "You are my servant,
Israel, in whom I will be glorified."**

As YHWH's 'servants' (44:26), inheriting the prophetic spirit (48:16), the members of this School had called Israel to take up its prophetic role as YHWH's servant (see 41:8, 9; 42:1; 43:10; 44:1, 2, 21; 45:4; 48:20). Encountering scepticism and resistance, they had criticised the people for failing to hear and to see (see 42:19). Now they realise that it is they who must carry out the mission intended for Israel. YHWH is calling them to *be* Israel. He is saying to them: '*You are my servant Israel.*'

**⁴But I said, "I have laboured in vain,
I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity;
yet surely my cause is with YHWH,
and my reward with my God."**

The burden of the responsibility is weighing on them. YHWH has chosen them, so they entrust their cause to him. They go on to describe the mission entrusted to them.

**⁵And now YHWH says,
who formed me in the womb to be his servant,
to bring Jacob back to him,
and that Israel might be gathered to him,
for I am honoured in the sight of YHWH,
and my God has become my strength—
⁶he says, "It is too light a thing that you should be my servant
to raise up the tribes of Jacob
and to restore the survivors of Israel;
I will give you as a light to the nations,
that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth."**

They must continue to work to bring Israel back to YHWH – which includes bringing them back to fidelity to the covenant and law (moral conversion), as well as working to bring them back from exile to the land of Judah. They must also be in themselves what YHWH is calling Israel to be: 'a light to the nations' (49:6; see 42:6; see Acts 13:47).

YHWH is faithful

Like Isaiah of old (see 19:24-25; 25:6-8), they must proclaim to the world God's offer of salvation. Once again they address their words to Israel.

**⁷Thus says YHWH,
the Redeemer of Israel and his Holy One,
to one deeply despised, abhorred by the nations,
the slave of rulers,
“Kings shall see and stand up,
princes, and they shall prostrate themselves,
because of YHWH, who is faithful,
the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you.”**

The nations have enslaved Israel, but this is about to change, YHWH will always be faithful to the promises that he has made through his prophets, and will never abandon his chosen people. That Israel is, indeed, YHWH's chosen people has been a central theme throughout these chapters:

You, Israel, my servant, Jacob, whom I have chosen,
the offspring of Abraham, my friend;
I took from the ends of the earth, and called from its farthest corners, saying to you,
“You are my servant, I have chosen you and not cast you off”

– Isaiah 41:8-9

You are my witnesses, says YHWH, and my servant whom I have chosen,
so that you may know and believe me and understand that I am He.
Before me no god was formed, nor shall there be any after me ...
I give water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert,
to give drink to my chosen people.

– Isaiah 43:10, 20

Hear, O Jacob my servant, Israel whom I have chosen!
Thus says YHWH who made you, who formed you in the womb and will help you:
Do not fear, O Jacob my servant, Jeshurun whom I have chosen.

– Isaiah 44:1-2

They receive encouragement from YHWH to carry out the mission for Judah entrusted to them (see 49:6-7).

⁸Thus says YHWH:

**In a time of favour I have answered you,
on a day of salvation I have helped you [see 1Corinthians 6:2]
I have kept you and given you
as a covenant to the people,
to establish the land,
to apportion the desolate heritages.**

They are to be for their own people what their people have been commissioned to be for the peoples of the world: a ‘covenant’ (see 42:6) – a sign of the communion which YHWH wants for Judah, and, through Judah, for all peoples. Since the land of those who were deported has been taken by others (see Jeremiah 39:10), re-apportioning of land was a crucial issue for anyone who wanted to return from exile. YHWH is commissioning this group of prophets to see that it is done according to his will.

**⁹saying to the prisoners, "Come out,"
to those who are in darkness, "Show yourselves."
They shall feed along the ways,
on all the bare heights shall be their pasture;
¹⁰they shall not hunger or thirst,
neither scorching wind nor sun shall strike them down,
for he who has pity on them will lead them,
and by springs of water will guide them.**

They announce, once again, YHWH's call for the exiled to return home. In language that repeats earlier images, YHWH assures the people that he will look after them as they undertake the journey back to the Promised Land.

I will lead the blind by a road they do not know,
by paths they have not known I will guide them.
I will turn the darkness before them into light, the rough places into level ground.
These are the things I will do, and I will not forsake them.

– Isaiah 42:16

He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms,
and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep.

– Isaiah 40:11

I will open rivers on the bare heights, and fountains in the midst of the valleys;
I will make the wilderness a pool of water, and the dry land springs of water.

– Isaiah 41:18

I give water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert,
to give drink to my chosen people.

– Isaiah 43:20

**¹¹And I will turn all my mountains into a road,
and my highways shall be raised up.
¹²Lo, these shall come from far away,
and lo, these from the north and from the west,
and these from the land of Syene.**

Syene (Aswan) is probably the most distant place of exile known to the authors.

**¹³Sing 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 *afflicted*.**

In verse ten YHWH speaks of 'having pity' (rāḥam). In verse thirteen we are told that YHWH 'has comforted (nāḥam) his people', and 'will have compassion (rāḥam) on his afflicted' ('ānî, those who cry out to God in their distress). This language evokes the image of a mother's love for the child at her breast. YHWH assures his people that his longing to care for and nurture them, his wanting to comfort them, and his feelings of compassion and love for them, are more than they can experience even from a mother who suckles her child.

YHWH cannot forget Jerusalem

**¹⁴But Zion said, “YHWH has forsaken me,
my Lord has forgotten me.”**

**¹⁵Can a woman forget her *unweaned* child,
or show no compassion for the child of her womb?
Even if these should forget,
I will not forget you.**

The message of verse 13 is reinforced. At the same time, the people’s reaction to deportation and exile is understandable. It is a familiar cry of the psalmist.

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning?

O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night, but find no rest.

– Psalm 22:1-2

They think in their heart, “God has forgotten, he has hidden his face.”

– Psalm 10:11

Do not deliver the soul of your dove to the wild animals;
do not forget the life of your poor forever.

– Psalm 74:19

Why have you forgotten us completely?

Why have you forsaken us these many days?

– Lamentations 5:20

**¹⁶See, I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands;
your walls are continually before me.**

YHWH is always attending to his design for the rebuilding of Jerusalem, and not just with his eyes, but with his hands, for he is actively engaged in seeing that the rebuilding goes ahead.

**¹⁷Your builders outdo your destroyers,
and those who laid you waste go away from you.**

**¹⁸Lift up your eyes, look about you;
they are all assembled, they have come to you.**

As I live, says YHWH,
you shall put all of them on like an ornament,
and like a bride you shall bind them on.

**¹⁹Surely your waste and your desolate places
and your devastated land—
surely now you will be too crowded for your inhabitants,
and those who swallowed you up will be far away.**

**²⁰The children born in the time of your bereavement
will yet say in your hearing:**

**“The place is too crowded for me;
make room for me to settle.”**

Jerusalem will be astonished to see herself and the surrounding land crowded with returned exiles. So many children have been born in exile that it is hard for them to find a place to settle. What a joy this will be for the city. How proud it will be of its children.

²¹Then you will say in your heart,
 “Who has borne me these?
 I was bereaved and barren,
 exiled and put away—
 so who has reared these?
 I was left all alone—
 where then have these come from?”

²²Thus says the Lord YHWH:
 I will soon lift up my hand to the nations,
 and raise my signal to the peoples;
 and they shall bring your sons in their bosom,
 and your daughters shall be carried on their shoulders.
²³Kings shall be your foster fathers,
 and their queens shall suckle you.
 With their faces to the ground they shall bow down to you,
 and lick the dust of your feet.

So many children have been born in exile, children that Mother-Jerusalem has never seen. Not only will the foreign nations see that the exiles are returned at a time determined by YHWH, but foreign kings and queens will serve the returned exiles in the role of domestic slaves.

²³Then you will know that I am YHWH;
 those who wait for me shall not be put to shame.

The exile had to happen for sin had to be purified away. Punishment reveals the important truth that sin can block our ability to enjoy divine communion unless we repent of it and go through what is needed to purify us from our sin. However, it is love that reveals who God really is. It is only when, with purified heart, the people open themselves to YHWH's blessings that they ‘will know that I am YHWH’ (49:23).

²⁴Can the prey be taken from the mighty,
 or the captives of a tyrant be rescued?

²⁵But thus says YHWH:
 Even the captives of the mighty shall be taken,
 and the prey of the tyrant be rescued;
 for I will contend with those who contend with you,
 and I will save your children.

²⁶I will make your oppressors eat their own flesh,
 and they shall be drunk with their own blood as with wine.

Some despair of waiting to see YHWH's promised liberation revealed. They doubt the prophets' word and opt to make the best of exile. Those, however, who dare to believe and who ‘wait for YHWH’ (49:23) will be vindicated. YHWH will rescue them. Their captors will not be able to resist him. Verse 26 is a metaphor for civil war (see Isaiah 9:19-20; Zechariah 11:9).

Consequence of sin

**²⁶Then all flesh shall know
that I am YHWH your Saviour,
and your Redeemer, the Mighty One of Jacob.**

In verse twenty-three YHWH declared that he wants Israel to ‘know that I am YHWH’. Here he declares that this is something he wants the whole world to know. On YHWH as ‘Saviour’ (môšî‘â) see 43:3, 11; 45:15, 21. On YHWH as Redeemer (gō‘ēl) see the commentary on 41:14 (page 154-155). He is the ‘Mighty One’ (‘ābîr; ‘ābbîr = ‘bull’) of Jacob (see Genesis 49:24; Isaiah 1:24).

**^{50:1}Thus says YHWH:
Where is your mother’s bill of divorce
with which I put her away?
Or which of my creditors is it
to whom I have sold you?
No, because of your sins you were sold,
and for your transgressions your mother was put away.**

They are speaking as though YHWH has cast them off like an unwanted spouse, but he has not divorced them (he challenges them to produce a document of divorce). They are speaking as though he has sold them into indentured slavery – which was something people were forced to do when unable to pay a debt. But YHWH owes no one anything. Why would he need to do this to a people who belong to him in such a special way? The real reason for the disaster of 586 and the subsequent deportation is not YHWH’s rejection of his people. It is Israel’s moral failure. This point was made right at the beginning:

Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term,
that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the YHWH’s hand
double for all her sins.

– Isaiah 40:2

Who gave up Jacob to the spoiler, and Israel to the robbers?
Was it not YHWH, against whom we have sinned,
in whose ways they would not walk, and whose law they would not obey?

– Isaiah 42:24

**²Why was no one there when I came?
Why did no one answer when I called?
Is my *reach* shortened, that it cannot redeem?
Or have I no power to deliver?
By my rebuke I dry up the sea,
I make the rivers a desert;
their fish stink for lack of water,
and die *on the parched ground*.**

**³I clothe the heavens with black mourning garb,
and make sackcloth their covering.**

YHWH came to his home but there was no one there; he called out but received no reply. Why did they doubt his power to save. The picture of the heavens in mourning sets the mood for the scene that follows.

**⁴The Lord YHWH has given me
the tongue of a *disciple*,
that I may know how to sustain
the weary with a word.
Morning by morning he wakens—
wakens my ear to listen *as disciples listen*.**

The members of this School of prophets know that they are called ‘to sustain the weary with a word’ – not with their own word, but with the word given them by YHWH. Hence their alert listening. One thinks of the prayer that the priest Eli told the young Samuel to pray: ‘Speak, YHWH, for your servant is listening’ (1Samuel 3:9).

We have noticed a gradual buildup in the doubts and scepticism of those whom the prophet-preachers have been called to address, their rebellion against God, and their opposition to and rejection of the prophetic word. Now we hear that the prophets are being mocked, and are suffering physical abuse.

**⁵The Lord YHWH has opened my ear,
and I for my part was not rebellious,
nor did I draw back.
⁶I gave my back to those who struck me,
and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard;
I did not hide my face
from insult and spitting.**

According to the *Martyrium Isaiae* from the last third of the first century AD, Isaiah ben Amoz died as a martyr, sawn in two under King Manasseh (see Hebrews 11:17; Mishna, jSanh 10.2; bSanh 103b). The authors identify with him in their prophetic spirit (see 49:1). They identify with him also in his experience of rejection, and they are determined ‘not to draw back’. Sustained by the help they receive from YHWH, they challenge their opponents to find fault with their ministry.

**⁷The Lord YHWH helps me;
therefore I have not been disgraced;
therefore I have set my face like flint,
and I know that I shall not be put to shame;
⁸he who vindicates me is near.
Who *dares bring an accusation against me?*
Let us *confront each other*.
Who are my adversaries?
Let them confront me.
⁹It is the Lord YHWH who helps me;
who will declare me guilty?
All of them will wear out like a garment;
the moth will eat them up.**

Note the absence of any call for vengeance. Suffering abuse because of obedience to their prophetic commission, they are confident in YHWH’s support (compare Hebrews 1:11).

**¹⁰Who among you fears YHWH?
Heed the voice of his servant.
*You who find yourself walking in the dark
without a glimmer of light,*
put your trust in the name of YHWH
and rely upon your God.**

They encourage those who are listening to their prophetic word even though it means ‘walking in the dark without a glimmer of light’. Speaking of themselves as YHWH’s ‘servant’ (50:10; see 49:1-6), they encourage people to continue to heed their words, and to keep trusting in YHWH. They then address the rest of the community – those who are mocking them and who are relying on their own resources without listening to YHWH.

**¹¹*But you are all lighting your own fire,
setting alight your own firebrands.*
You walk in the flame of your own fire,
by the firebrands you yourself have kindled!
This is what you shall have from my hand:
you shall lie down in torment.**

This is YHWH’s judgment passed upon them.

The prophet-preachers address those receptive to their message (51:1-8)

**¹Listen to me, you that pursue righteousness,
you that seek YHWH.
Look to the rock from which you were hewn,
and to the quarry from which you were dug.
²Look to Abraham your father
and to Sarah who bore you;
for he was but one when I called him,
but I blessed him and made him many.
³For YHWH will comfort Zion;
he will comfort all her waste places,
and will make her wilderness like Eden,
her desert like the garden of YHWH;
joy and gladness will be found in her,
thanksgiving and the voice of song.**

The prophet-preachers are endeavouring to encourage those whom they addressed in 50:10 – those who ‘pursue righteousness’ and ‘seek YHWH’. Though they are listening to God’s word spoken through his servants, they are disheartened, partly because they are so few, but also because Jerusalem still lies in ruins. There is so little to support their hope. The prophet-preachers remind them that in the beginning there was only Abraham (‘the rock from which you were hewn’) and Sarah (‘the quarry from which you were dug’). Yet God was true to his promise (Genesis 12:1-3) and made their descendants many. Judah is a wasteland still, but God can and will make it like Eden.

- ⁴Listen to me, my people,
and give heed to me, my nation;
for a *law* will go out from me,
and my justice for a light to the peoples.**
- ⁵I will bring near my deliverance swiftly,
my salvation has gone out
and my arm will rule the peoples;
the coastlands wait for me,
and for my arm they hope.**
- ⁶Lift up your eyes to the heavens,
and look at the earth beneath;
for the heavens will vanish like smoke,
the earth will wear out like a garment,
and those who live on it will die like gnats;
but my salvation will be forever,
and my *triumph will not be eclipsed.***

These verses take us back to 42:1-9 in which Israel was called YHWH's servant and was commissioned to 'established in the earth an order based on justice'(42:4). They were chosen by YHWH to reveal him and his 'law'(tôrâ) to the ends of the earth (see 42:4). Gradually it has become clear that the message of these prophets is not being heeded. However, they are determined to continue to 'pursue righteousness and seek YHWH'(51:1), and to respond to YHWH's call by accepting to be his instruments in seeing that 'my teaching will go out from me and my justice for a light to the peoples'. Heaven and earth will pass away, but not YHWH's salvation (compare Jesus' statement in Matthew 24:35).

We have seen how they are being reviled (50:4-11), and how they 'did not draw back'(50:5). Putting their trust in YHWH they set their face like flint (50:7). They are encouraging the small group that are listening to follow their example.

- ⁷Listen to me, you who know righteousness,
you people who have my teaching in your hearts;
do not fear the reproach of others,
and do not be dismayed when they revile you.**
- ⁸For the moth will eat them up like a garment,
and the worm will eat them like wool.**

Sound out the following and listen to the assonance in the Hebrew of the above two lines. .

for like-a-garment will-eat-them-up the-moth, like-wool will-eat-them-up the-grub
ki kabbeged yo'k'lem 'ās vekaṣṣēmer yo'k'lem sās

This is one of hundreds of examples that could be given as a reminder of the impossibility of communicating the richness of poetry in translation. We can translate the ideas, but lose the music and the power of the words.

- ⁸My deliverance will be forever,
and my salvation to all generations.**

An appeal to God to act

Throughout Isaiah 40-55 YHWH has been presented as the lord of creation and the lord of history. Here the prophet-preachers appeal to the obvious power displayed by YHWH as creator and redeemer, and plead that YHWH will exercise this same power now to do what he has been promising to do and to get his people home from exile.

**⁹Awake, awake, put on strength,
O arm of YHWH!
Awake, as in days of old,
the generations of long ago!**

The repetition of 'awake' ('ûrî, 'ûrî ... 'ûrî), a repetition repeated in 51:17 and 52:1, reminds us of the repetition of 'comfort' in the opening words of this section of the Isaiah scroll (naḥ^amû, naḥ^amû, 40:1). We hear the same plea in Psalm 44:23-26.

Rouse yourself! Why do you sleep, O Lord? Awake, do not cast us off forever!
Why do you hide your face? Why do you forget our affliction and oppression?
For we sink down to the dust; our bodies cling to the ground.
Rise up, come to our help. Redeem us for the sake of your steadfast love.

**⁹Was it not you who cut Rahab in pieces,
who pierced the dragon?**

On page 140 we gave a summary of the Babylonian myth, the Enuma Elish. Marduk, the chief god of Babylon, was celebrated as the god who killed Tiamat and created the world from her dismembered body. Rahab is one name given to the mythical monster defeated by YHWH (not Marduk; see Psalm 89:10; Job 26:12-13). The Dragon (tannîn) features in the creation narrative (see Genesis 1:21; see also Psalm 74:13; 148:7; Job 7:12).

**¹⁰Was it not you who dried up the Sea,
the waters of the Great Deep;**

The 'Great Deep' (têhôm) is Tiamat of the Babylonian myth, found also in the creation story (Genesis 1:2) and the story of the flood (see Genesis 7:11; 8:2).

**who made the depths of the Sea a way
for the redeemed to cross over?**

Having 'reminded' God of the power he demonstrated in creation, the prophet-preachers go on to 'remind' God of the power he showed when he dried up the Sea (yam), thus freeing the Israelites from exile in Egypt. They are calling on God to do it again: to redeem his exiled people, so that they can do what their ancestors did, and journey to the Promised Land.

**¹¹So the ransomed of YHWH shall return,
and come to Zion with singing;
everlasting joy shall be upon their heads;
they shall obtain joy and gladness,
and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.**

Verse eleven is found also in Isaiah 35:10, forging another link between Isaiah 40-55 and Isaiah 2 to 35.

- ¹²**I, I am he who comforts you;
 why then are you afraid of a mere mortal who must die,
 a human being who fades like grass?**
- ¹³**You have forgotten YHWH, your Maker,
 who stretched out the heavens
 and laid the foundations of the earth.
 You fear continually all day long
 because of the fury of the oppressor,
 who is bent on destruction.
 But where is the fury of the oppressor?**
- ¹⁴**The oppressed shall speedily be released;
 they shall not die and go down to the Pit,
 nor shall they lack bread.**
- ¹⁵**For I am YHWH your God,
 who stirs up the sea so that its waves roar —
 YHWH of hosts is his name.**

This is YHWH's response. It is not YHWH who needs arousing. It is Israel. It is not YHWH who needs reminding. It is Israel. YHWH's opening words repeat the assurance he gave them in the opening verse: 'Comfort, comfort, my people, says your God' (40:1). Here he reassures them: he is the lord of creation, and they will see that he is the lord of history.

Having relayed to the people YHWH's words of reassurance, the preachers conclude by sharing personal words of reassurance that they have received. These words of encouragement encompass those faithful ones who continue to put their trust in YHWH and in the prophetic word coming to them through YHWH's servants.

- ¹⁶**I have put my words in your mouth,
 and hidden you in the shadow of my hand,
 stretching out the heavens
 and laying the foundations of the earth,
 and saying to Zion, "You are my people."**

Their suffering is over

On the people's behalf, the prophet-preachers have just pleaded with YHWH to rouse himself. Now, on YHWH's behalf, they make the same plea to the people. They speak first of the terrible experience of siege, destruction, death and deportation (586), referring to it in traditional terms as their having drunk to the dregs the cup of the 'anger of YHWH' (see pages 46-48; and compare Jeremiah 25:15-29).

- ¹⁷Rouse yourself, rouse yourself!
Stand up, O Jerusalem,
you who have drunk at the hand of YHWH
the cup of his wrath,
who have drunk to the dregs
the bowl of staggering.
- ¹⁸There is no one to guide her
among all the children she has borne;
there is no one to take her by the hand
among all the children she has brought up.
- ¹⁹These two things have befallen you
—who will grieve with you?—
devastation and destruction, famine and sword—
who will comfort you?
- ²⁰Your children have fainted,
they lie at the head of every street
like an antelope in a net;
they are full of the wrath of YHWH,
the rebuke of your God.

Now comes relief. YHWH will take the cup of wrath from them and give it to their oppressors.

- ²¹Therefore hear this, you who are wounded,
who are drunk, but not with wine:
- ²²Thus says your Sovereign, YHWH,
your God who *defends* his people's cause:
See, I have taken from your hand the cup of staggering;
you shall drink no more
from the bowl of my wrath.
- ²³And I will put it into the hand of your tormentors,
who have said to you,
"Bow down, that we may walk on you";
and you have made your back like the ground
and like the street for them to walk on.

¹Awake, awake,
 put on your strength, O Zion!
 Put on your beautiful garments,
 O Jerusalem, the holy city;
 for the uncircumcised and the unclean
 shall enter you no more.
²Shake yourself from the dust, rise up,
 ascend your throne, O Jerusalem;
 loose the bonds from your neck,
 O captive daughter Zion!

For the third time we have ‘awake, awake’ (see 51:9, 17). Like the previous passage, this is addressed to Jerusalem. From being a captive she is become a queen. This is the reverse of chapter 47, which was directed at Babylon.

³For thus says YHWH:
 You were sold for nothing,
 and you shall be redeemed without money.
⁴For thus says the Lord YHWH:
 Long ago, my people went down to Egypt to reside as aliens.
 Later Assyria oppressed them
 giving nothing in return.
⁵Now therefore what am I doing here, says YHWH,
 seeing that my people are taken away for nothing?
 Their rulers howl, says YHWH, and continually,
 all day long, my name is despised.
⁶Therefore my people shall know my name;
 therefore in that day they shall know
 that it is I who speak; here am I.

The prophet-preachers speak of the oppression suffered by Israel from Egypt, Assyria and Babylon. They begin by stating that YHWH’s intervention is a sheer act of divine graciousness, and end with YHWH’s assurance that he is here ready to act.

⁷How beautiful upon the mountains
 are the feet of the messenger who announces peace,
 who brings good news,
 who announces salvation,
 who says to Zion, “Your God reigns.”

In the opening chapter, Jerusalem was commissioned to be a ‘herald of good news’ (40:9, *bāšar*; LXX *euangelizō*) to the towns of Judah – the good news that YHWH has not abandoned them, but is coming in triumph. Here the focus is on those who are bringing this good news to Jerusalem (see Romans 10:15). The good news is of the ‘peace’ (*šālôm*; compare Nahum 1:15) and the ‘salvation’ (*yēšū‘â*) that come when ‘your God reigns’. This takes us to the heart of the religion of Israel for it focuses on YHWH as the source of peace and salvation while at the same time underlining the central importance of obedience (the willing acceptance of God’s reign).

Triumphant return to Jerusalem

The New Testament is in complete accord with these words. Jesus is God's herald and his message is summed up in the words: 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news' (Mark 1:15; compare Romans 10:15 and Ephesians 6:15).

**⁸Listen! Your sentinels lift up their voices,
together they sing for joy;
for in plain sight they see
the return of YHWH to Zion.
⁹Break forth together into singing,
you ruins of Jerusalem;
for YHWH has comforted his people,
he has redeemed Jerusalem.
¹⁰YHWH has bared his holy arm
before the eyes of all the nations;
and all the ends of the earth shall see
the salvation of our God.**

We recall YHWH's earlier words:

I bring near my deliverance, it is not far off, and my salvation will not tarry;
I will put salvation in Zion, for Israel my glory.

– Isaiah 46:13

Also his earlier words to his servants. Salvation is never meant to be limited to Israel:

It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob
and to restore the survivors of Israel; I will give you as a light to the nations,
that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.

– Isaiah 49:6

Ezekiel, too, speaks of YHWH's triumphant return to Jerusalem after the exile:

He brought me to the gate, the gate facing east. And there, the glory of the God of Israel was coming from the east; the sound was like the sound of mighty waters; and the earth shone with his glory. The vision I saw was like the vision that I had seen when he came to destroy the city, and like the vision that I had seen by the river Chebar; and I fell upon my face. As the glory of YHWH entered the temple by the gate facing east, the spirit lifted me up, and brought me into the inner court; and the glory of YHWH filled the temple.

– Ezekiel 43:1-5

**¹¹Depart, depart, go out from there!
Touch no unclean thing;
go out from the midst of it, purify yourselves,
you who carry the vessels of YHWH.**

The call to 'depart' is repeated (sûrû, sûrû) They are going to the 'holy city' (52:1), a purified priestly people carrying the vessels of the cult. Babylon is not mentioned here (contrast 48:20), for the call is for everyone who is not in a holy place to leave for the 'holy city'.

**¹²For you shall not go out in haste,
and you shall not go in flight;
for YHWH will go before you,
and the God of Israel will be your rear guard.**

The departure from Egypt had to be done in haste (Exodus 12:11). This is not the case now, for they are departing, not as escaping slaves, but as the people of one who has conquered their oppressors. As in the Exodus (see Exodus 13:21-22; 14:19-20), YHWH is surrounding them with his protective presence.

The suffering and rejected servant (52:13 - 53:12)

Who is the suffering and rejected servant described in this poem? Is it Israel? Isaiah ben Amoz spoke of Judah as a vineyard that yielded bitter grapes (5:1-2), as a woman in the pangs of childbirth (26:17), as clay shaped by a potter (29:16). He spoke of the people eating the bread of adversity and drinking the water of affliction (30:20). He spoke of the people as blind, deaf, lame and dumb. But, thanks to YHWH's faithful love, there was always the hope, that 'the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy'(35:5-6).

The prophet-preachers in exile have just likened Jerusalem to a bereaved and barren mother who is overcome at the sight of her children returning from exile (49:21). Are they now recalling the terrible experiences of abuse and rejection suffered by Israel, YHWH's servant, and saying that the nation, the land, the city, has suffered because of the sins of its people, but that the nation, YHWH's suffering servant, would rise again?

Or is their focus somewhat narrower? In introducing this section (page 182) I suggested that those responsible for this material came to the realisation that YHWH was calling them to realise the mission given to the people, but which the people had largely failed to take up. They saw themselves as being called by YHWH to be his 'servants'. They told us this in 49:1-6. Later, in 50:4-9, they spoke of their being rejected and abused. Are they speaking of themselves in this poem as YHWH's faithful servants who have been rejected because of the sins of their compatriots, but confident that they would be vindicated?

We could also ask: Is the depiction of the suffering, rejected, but ultimately vindicated, servant, simply an extended metaphor either for Israel or for this 'School' of prophet-preachers, or are its authors also reflecting on and identifying with the experience of Isaiah ben Amoz (see the commentary on 50:4-9, page 189)? Nearer to home, were they reflecting on the experience of a significant member of their own group?

There seems no persuasive argument that would require us to eliminate any of the above suggestions. The poem has its own dynamic power. Perhaps it would be best to let it do what poetry does best: carry us where it will.

Because of the obvious parallels with the suffering and death of Jesus, the New Testament writers frequently point to this passage to help persuade their fellow Jews to look more carefully at Jesus. Like the servant eulogised here, Jesus was abused and rejected. Also like him Jesus was the one who was faithful to the call and mission of God.

The suffering servant

Jesus' disciples were helped by this passage to get some insight into the mystery of Jesus' suffering and death, and how it was his response in faithful love that astonished his disciples, and helped them find words to convey to others how Jesus, like the servant of this poem, through his faithful love, revealed for everyone to see the wonder of the faithful love of God. The focus of this commentary will be to try to read this text as it was intended to be read by its authors. Because of the importance of this passage in the New Testament we will insert texts that express the reflections of Jesus' disciples when they pondered the suffering and death of Jesus.

- ¹³**See, my servant shall prosper;
he shall be exalted, lifted up; he shall be very high.**
- ¹⁴**Just as there were many who were astonished at him
—so marred was his appearance, beyond human semblance,
and his form beyond that of mortals—**
- ¹⁵**so he shall startle many nations;
kings shall shut their mouths because of him;
for that which had not been told them they shall see,
and that which they had not heard they shall contemplate.**

These opening words will be developed more fully in the body of the poem. They prepare us for a story of the astonishing humiliation of YHWH's 'servant' (Israel? The faithful members of this School?), issuing in an even more astonishing exaltation. They prepare us also for the amazing insight that God is revealed in the juxtaposition of the suffering and the glorification. We are reminded of an earlier text:

You have heard; now see all this; and will you not declare it?
From this time forward I make you hear new things,
hidden things that you have not known.

— Isaiah 48:6

There has been so much talk throughout the Isaiah scroll of people looking without seeing, and listening without hearing, it is encouraging to have the assurance that people will, indeed, see and hear and be astonished. We find the same confidence in the New Testament. Jesus himself said:

Blessed are your eyes because they see, and your ears because they hear!

— Matthew 13:16

Quoting 52:15, Paul speaking of the risen Jesus, writes:

As it is written: Those who have never been told of him shall see, and those who have never heard of him shall understand.'

— Romans 15:21

**¹Who would believe what we have heard?
And to whom has the arm of YHWH been revealed?**

Like those for whom this poem was composed, we are so used to looking for God's power where we see evidence of unexpected success, victory and miraculous healing, that we find it unbelievable to think of divine power revealed in what we see as failure, weakness and death. How could devastated Jerusalem ever be a sign of YHWH's power? How could a small, ostracised group of prophets in exile be YHWH's instruments in revealing his glory?

In the New Testament, in reference to Jesus, John writes:

Although Jesus had performed so many signs in their presence they did not believe in him in order that the word which the prophet Isaiah spoke might be fulfilled: 'Lord, who has believed our preaching, to whom has the might of the Lord been revealed.'

– John 12:37-38.

Paul, too, quotes this verse:

But not all have obeyed the good news; for Isaiah says, "Lord, who has believed our message?"

– Romans 10:16

**²For he grew up before him like a young plant,
and like a root out of dry ground;
he had no form or majesty that we should look at him,
nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.
³He was despised and rejected by others;
a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity;
and as one from whom others hide their faces
he was despised, and we held him of no account.**

We think of the 'dry ground' of devastated Judah, and of the land of exile. We think of how Judah must have looked to its neighbours. We think, too, of the ostracised servants of YHWH in exile. In neither situation would we expect to see 'the arm of YHWH revealed'(53:1). There are many passages in the psalms that resemble the above lines.

I am the scorn of all my adversaries, a horror to my neighbours,
an object of dread to my acquaintances; those who see me in the street flee from me.

– Psalm 31:11

My friends and companions stand aloof from my affliction,
and my neighbours stand far off.

– Psalm 38:11

You have caused my companions to shun me;
you have made me a thing of horror to them.
I am shut in so that I cannot escape ...
You have caused friend and neighbour to shun me;
my companions are in darkness.

– Psalm 88:8, 18

The psalm that perhaps best echoes this description is the psalm that is placed on the lips of the dying Jesus:

I am a worm, and not human; scorned by others, and despised by the people.
All who see me mock at me; they make mouths at me, they shake their heads.

– Psalm 22:6-7

There are parallels also in Job, which, like this poem, may be a parable on devastated and restored Judah. See, too, the Book of Lamentations.

The suffering servant

**⁴Surely he has borne our infirmities
and carried our diseases;
yet we accounted him stricken,
struck down by God, and afflicted.**

**⁵But he was wounded for our transgressions,
crushed for our iniquities;
upon him was the punishment that made us whole,
and by his bruises we are healed.**

This is a new and rare insight into suffering. The authors shared the assumption that suffering is a divine punishment for sin. If this is a poem about Israel (Judah), they are making a distinction. Judah is devastated, but the fault is not Judah's, it is the fault of the people of Judah who transgress. The terrible suffering of Judah and Jerusalem has been YHWH's way of bringing its people to their senses in order to heal them. If the authors are thinking of themselves as a rejected minority, they are looking on their innocent suffering as redemptive for the community. They are not suffering *instead* of the community. They understood that sinners must be punished in order to be purified. But they are suffering *because* of the community, and *for* the community, and in some way they see their suffering as redemptive.

Matthew chooses this text to summarise Jesus' ministry:

He fulfilled what had been said by Isaiah the prophet: 'He has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases.'

– Matthew 8:17

Peter speaks of Jesus in terms borrowed from the portrait of the suffering servant given here and in the following verses. Note the direct quote from verse 9.

Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in his steps. "He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth." When he was abused, he did not return abuse; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed. For you were going astray like sheep, but now you have returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls.

– 1Peter 2:21-25

There is obviously nothing automatic about us being made whole or being healed. It is obvious from the reading of Isaiah 40-55, and the material composed after the return from exile (Isaiah 56-66) that there is a lot of sin around. The prophet-preachers are pleading with us to 'contemplate'(52:15) more deeply the suffering of the servant and allow ourselves to be 'astonished' at what we see and hear.

When Paul writes: 'Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures'(1Corinthians 15:3), this text from Isaiah is part of the scriptures to which he refers. He alludes to it in his Letter to the Romans:

Jesus was handed over for our transgressions.

– Romans 4:25

**⁶All we like sheep have gone astray;
 we have all turned to our own way,
 and YHWH has laid on him
 the iniquity of us all.**

**⁷He was oppressed, and he was afflicted,
 yet he did not open his mouth;
 like a lamb that is led to the slaughter,
 and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent,
 so he did not open his mouth.**

This is the text that the eunuch asked Philip to explain (see Acts 8:32-33). All who were familiar with the temple cult would immediately grasp the message. They knew that it was sin that blocked them off from divine communion and blessing. The cult provided those who repented of sin a way in which to give expression to their repentance and experience forgiveness. They would take a sheep and sacrifice it as a reparation offering ('āšam, see Leviticus 5:14-19). The prophet-preachers are saying that just as YHWH was pleased to accept the sacrificed sheep, so he accepted the servant's offering of his suffering and death as reparation for the people's sin.

This is one of the texts that stand behind references to Jesus as the lamb of God. John the Baptist introduces Jesus:

Behold the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.

– John 1:29

The Book of Revelation addresses the crucified and risen Christ portrayed as a lamb:

You were slain and with your blood you purchased for God those from every tribe and tongue, people and nation.

– Revelation 5:9

Is Matthew alluding to Isaiah 53:7 when he writes:

When Jesus was accused by the chief priests and elders, he made no answer.

– Matthew 27:12

Also the author of the Letter to the Hebrews (9:28):

Christ was offered once for the taking away of the sins of many.

The poem describes the terrible perversion of justice that led to the servant's treatment.

**⁸By a perversion of justice he was taken away.
Who of his contemporaries gave this any thought?
 For he was cut off from the land of the living,
 stricken for the transgression of *his* people.**

**⁹They made his grave with the wicked
 and his tomb with the rich,
 although he had done no violence,
 and there was no deceit in his mouth.**

'His people' follows the Qumran text. If 'rich' ('āsîr) is correct in verse 9, the authors are presumably speaking of those who, unlike the poor, look to themselves and not to God for what they need. Some suggest that the Hebrew should read 'ošê ra' ('those doing evil').

The suffering servant

The New Testament consistently refers to Jesus' innocence:

He was revealed to take away sins, and in him there is no sin

– 1John 3:5

¹⁰Yet it was the will of YHWH to crush him with pain.

As it stands this statement is consistent with the assumption found throughout the Older Testament that, since God controls the world, whatever happens must in some way be willed by God. The argument runs: the servant was crushed with pain, so YHWH must have willed it. The Greek version, however, reads differently. Where the accepted Hebrew text reads 'crush him in pain', the Septuagint has 'cleanse him from his wound'. The next line speaks of the reparation offering ('āšam) mentioned above (53:9, page 201). The text here is also problematic.

*He has laid down his life as a reparation offering;
he will see his offspring; he will prolong his days;
through him the will of YHWH shall prevail.*

¹¹From his anguish of soul he will see and be content.

Judah will survive its destruction, as will the faithful servants of the Isaiah School. It is hard not to think here of Isaiah ben Amoz. They could make a martyr of him, but they could not destroy his message. It is proclaimed by his disciples, through whom he lives on (compare Isaiah 30:20-21).

YHWH now speaks:

**¹¹By his knowledge my righteous servant, shall make many righteous;
he bears the burden of their iniquities.**

The prophetic word is never meant for only a small group. The prophet-preachers saw themselves as 'servants' of YHWH called to 'make *many* righteous'. They have been called to be 'a light to the nations, that YHWH's salvation may reach to the end of the earth' (49:6). They have been graced to 'know how to sustain the weary with a word' (50:4). The authors of this poem are convinced that the knowledge (the message) of God's righteous servant will make many righteous.

Jesus saw his mission in these terms:

The Son of Man came to give his life as a ransom for many.

– Mark 10:45

Likewise at the last supper when offering the cup to his disciples, Jesus says:

This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many.

– Mark 14:24

See, too, Paul's words comparing Jesus to Adam:

The free gift is not like the trespass. For if the many died through the one man's trespass, much more surely have the grace of God and the free gift in the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, abounded for the many ... through the obedience of one, many shall be made righteous.

– Romans 5:15,19

**¹²Therefore I will allot him a portion with the great,
and he shall divide the spoil with the strong;
because he poured out himself to death,
and was numbered with the transgressors;
yet he bore the sin of many,
and made intercession for the transgressors.**

The opening words of the poem prepared us for this: ‘My servant shall prosper, he shall be exalted, lifted up; he shall be very high’ (52:13). The servant trusted in YHWH: ‘I am honoured in the sight of YHWH, and my God has become my strength’ (49:5); ‘he who vindicates me is near’ (50:8). Judah and Jerusalem are suffering now, weighed down by the sins of their children, but they will be vindicated, as will the servants of this exilic School.

The disciples of Jesus witnessed the victory of God’s servant, Jesus, when they experienced the presence and action of the risen Jesus in their midst. Peter speaks for them all when he claims:

The God of our ancestors has glorified his servant Jesus.

– Acts 3:13

In his account of Jesus’ suffering and death, Luke quotes from this verse:

The scripture must be fulfilled: ‘He was counted among the wicked.’

– Luke 22:37

He seems to be drawing on this verse also when he writes:

Jesus kept on praying: ‘Father forgive them.’

– Luke 23:34

The connection between acceptance of suffering and exaltation is a connection that is made often in the New Testament when Jesus’ disciples speak of Jesus’ death and resurrection.

Jesus said to them: Oh, how foolish you are! How slow of heart to believe all that the prophets spoke! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and enter into his glory?’

– Luke 24:25-26

It is written regarding the Son of Man that he must suffer greatly and be treated with contempt.

– Mark 9:12

There is always a danger when we attempt to ‘explain’ poetry. This magnificent gem reminds us of a saying of Jeremiah, already quoted in the Introduction (see page 3):

Is not my word like fire, says YHWH, and like a hammer which breaks the rock in pieces?

– Jeremiah 23:29

There are so many levels of meaning, so many allusions, in this masterpiece, so many shifts of perspective. The key thrust, however, is clear: Suffering that is borne patiently by one who prays for and offers himself for his oppressors is redemptive. It is no wonder that Jesus’ disciples looked to this poem to find words in which to express their wonder as they contemplated Jesus’ self-giving love even unto death..

YHWH's everlasting love

Having spoken of Jerusalem as one cut off because of the sins of many, but offering his life for their purification, the text now speaks of the city as a childless mother.

**¹Sing, O barren one who did not bear;
burst into song and shout,
you who have not been in labour!**

Like Sarah (Genesis 11:30), Rebekah (Genesis 25:21), and Rachel (Genesis 29:31), Jerusalem's only hope for children is a miracle – and it is about to happen.

**For the children of the *abandoned* wife will outnumber
the children of those living a married life, says YHWH.**

**²Enlarge the site of your tent,
and let the curtains of your habitations be stretched out;
do not hold back; lengthen your ropes,
*drive the tentpegs home.***

**³For you will spread out to the right and to the left,
and your descendants will *dispossess* the nations
and will settle the desolate towns.**

The poetry picks up the promise made to Jacob:

Your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south.

– Genesis 28:14

It picks up also the Deuteronomic theme of the dispossessing of the nations in Canaan:

YHWH your God himself will cross over before you. He will destroy these nations before you, and you shall dispossess them.

– Deuteronomy 31:3

**⁴Do not fear, for you will not be *disappointed*;
do not be discouraged, for you will not suffer *reproach*;
for you will forget the shame of your youth,
the disgrace of your widowhood you will remember no more.**

**⁵For your Maker is your husband,
YHWH of hosts is his name;
the Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer,
the God of the whole earth he is called.**

Her husband has come back to his 'abandoned wife'. 'YHWH of hosts', 'Holy One of Israel', and 'Redeemer' function as a kind of refrain throughout Isaiah 40-55 (see 41:14, 43:14, 47:4, 48:17 and 49:7).

**⁶For YHWH has called you back
like a wife forsaken and grieved in spirit,
like the wife of a man's youth when she is cast off,
says your God.**

As stated earlier (see 50:1-2), YHWH never divorced the city. It was only ever meant to be a separation with a view to repentance, purification, and a joyful and fruitful reunion.

**7For a brief moment I abandoned you,
but with great compassion I will gather you.**

‘Compassion’ translates the Hebrew *rah^amîm*, derived from *rehem* (‘womb’). Though YHWH is speaking here as a husband, not a mother, he likens his love to that of a woman for the child in her womb. This takes us back to an earlier complaint, and to God’s response:

Zion said, “YHWH has forsaken me, my Lord has forgotten me.”
Can a woman forget her *unweaned* child,
or show no compassion for the child of her womb?
Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you.

– Isaiah 49:14-15

**8In overflowing wrath for a moment
I hid my face from you,
but with everlasting love I will have compassion on you,
says YHWH, your Redeemer.**

On YHWH’s ‘wrath’ see Isaiah 5:25 (pages 46-48). ‘Love’ translates the Hebrew *hesed*, which speaks of fidelity to a covenant, including a marriage covenant. ‘Have compassion’ translates the Hebrew *rāham* (the verb that is cognate with *rah^amîm* in verse seven).

**9This is like the days of Noah to me:
Just as I swore that the waters of Noah
would never again go over the earth,
so I have sworn that I will not be angry with you
and will not rebuke you.**

To support the fact that YHWH took an oath to be faithful to his side of the covenant with Israel the author recalls the covenant with Noah (Genesis 9:11). Because of sin, the world had to go through the purification of the flood, but it was not annihilated. So Jerusalem had to go through the purification of destruction and deportation, but it survived the destruction and it will rise up again. YHWH never stopped loving her.

**10For the mountains may depart
and the hills be removed,
but my steadfast love shall not depart from you,
and my covenant of peace shall not be removed,
says YHWH, who has compassion on you.**

11O afflicted one, storm-tossed, and not comforted,

Jerusalem is described as ‘not comforted (*lō’ nuḥāmâ*), linking up with the theme of ‘comfort’ with which the prophecy began (see 40:1, page 143).

**I am about to *lay your stones with the finest mortar,*
and lay your foundations with sapphires.**

**12I will make your pinnacles of rubies,
your gates of jewels,
and all your wall of precious stones.**

Thirsting for the prophetic word

¹³All your children shall be taught by YHWH,

Jesus quotes this line in John 6:45 as he invites people to yield to God's invitation and come to him.

and great shall be the prosperity of your children.

**¹⁴In righteousness you shall be established;
you shall be far from oppression, for you shall not fear;
and from terror, for it shall not come near you.**

**¹⁵If anyone stirs up strife,
I will put an end to it;
whoever stirs up strife with you
shall fall because of you.**

**¹⁶See it is I who have created the smith
who blows the fire of coals,
and produces a weapon fit for its purpose;
I have also created the ravager to destroy.**

**¹⁷No weapon that is fashioned against you shall prevail;
you shall confute every tongue that rises against you in judgment.
This is the heritage of the servants of YHWH
and their vindication from me, says YHWH.**

The authors are referring here to themselves. YHWH has promised them a 'heritage' and 'vindication'.

Isaiah 55

Chapter 55 seems to have been created to provide a transition from the exilic writings of Isaiah 40-54 to the post-exilic writings of Isaiah 56-66. It stresses the importance of accepting the prophetic word – a word that we should expect to be beyond human comprehension. However things might look, the promises conveyed through it will eventuate.

**¹All of you there who are thirsty,
come to the waters.
You have no money?
come, buy and eat!
Come, buy wine and milk
without money and *at no cost*.**

God's gift is unconditionally offered. Of course it is conditionally received, for no one is forced to welcome it. Significantly, water is used as a symbol for God's life-giving spirit, especially as expressed in his prophetic word:

I will pour water on the thirsty land, and streams on the dry ground;
I will pour my spirit upon your descendants, and my blessing on your offspring.

– Isaiah 44:3

We recall Jesus' invitation:

Let anyone who thirsts come to me and drink!

– John 7:37 (see also Revelation 21:6, 17).

We are reminded, too, of the following text from the Book of Proverbs. Divine wisdom is speaking:

Wisdom has built her house, she has hewn her seven pillars.
 She has slaughtered her animals, she has mixed her wine, she has also set her table.
 She has sent out her servant girls, she calls from the highest places in the town,
 “You that are simple, turn in here!” To those without sense she says,
 “Come, eat of my bread and drink of the wine I have mixed.
 Lay aside immaturity, and live, and walk in the way of insight.”

– Proverbs 9:1-6

- ²Why do you spend your money on what is not food?
 Why spend your earnings on what does not satisfy?
 Listen carefully to me if you want to eat well,
 and you will be delighted with the richest fare.**
- ³Incline your ear, and come to me;
 listen, so that you may live.**
- ³I will make with you an everlasting covenant,
 showing you the faithful love I showed to David.**
- ⁴See, I made him a witness to the peoples,
 a prince who ruled over nations.**

The authors give no indication of where they stand as regards the hopes for the restoration of the Davidic dynasty expressed, for example, in Jeremiah 23:5-8 (see also Psalm 89:27-37). There may have been sound political reasons for their silence. In a situation where there was no king ruling Judah, they are assuring the people that YHWH is promising them the same faithful love that he promised David. Even some of the language picks up words found in the account of YHWH’s promise to David found in 2Samuel 7:8-17, where David is called a ‘prince’ (7:8), and where God promises him ‘faithful love’ (7:15).

- ⁵See, you shall *summon* nations that you do not know,
 and nations that do not know you shall *come running* to you,
 because of YHWH your God, the Holy One of Israel,
 for he has glorified you.**

We have already heard that nations will come to Jerusalem to seek instruction in the Torah:

Many 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.

– Isaiah 2:3

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

– Isaiah 19:24-25

Paul sees the risen and exalted Jesus as inheriting the promises made to David:

‘I will give you the holy promises made to David.

– Acts 13:34

- ⁶Seek YHWH while he may be found,
call upon him while he is near;**
- ⁷let the wicked forsake their way,
and the unrighteous their thoughts;
let them return to YHWH, that he may have mercy on them,
and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.**
- ⁸For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
nor are your ways my ways, says YHWH.**
- ⁹For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways
and my thoughts than your thoughts.**
- ¹⁰For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven,
and do not return there until they have watered the earth,
making it bring forth and sprout,
giving seed to the sower and bread *for food*,**
- ¹¹so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth;
it shall not return to me empty,
but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,
and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.**

This appeal is directed at those who have not welcomed the prophetic word, those who have been ‘unrighteous in their thoughts’. They are reminded of YHWH’s mercy and generosity in pardoning. They find it hard to believe, for as yet there is little evidence to support the promises that this School of prophets in exile has made to them in God’s name. But this is not a reason to doubt. How can they expect to understand the ways of heaven? They are assured that God’s purpose expressed through the prophetic word will be accomplished. They cannot see it yet, but they will leave exile and the whole of God’s creation will exult. Their return to Judah will be a sign of the power and faithful love of YHWH, a sign which everyone will see.

- ¹²For you shall go out in joy,
and be led *out* in peace;
the mountains and the hills before you
shall burst into song,
and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.**
- ¹³Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress;
instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle;
and it shall be to YHWH for a memorial,
for an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off.**