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**ISAIAH**



# **INTRODUCTION**

### The Isaiah Scroll

As noted in the Introduction, it is important to try to establish the context within which a prophet was speaking. It was also pointed out that this attempt is made difficult for us by the way in which the prophetic scrolls developed (see pages 8-9). If today we wish to comment on a text from the past or to express ways in which the insights might apply to our changed circumstances, we are careful to distinguish between the words of a past author and our commentary. This was not the practice in ancient Israel.

They took great care to preserve the words of the prophets, for they were treasured as giving inspired expression to the 'word of YHWH'. As events unfolded it became clear that many of those who claimed to be speaking for God were 'false prophets'. The text we are about to study will have something to say about this. When, however, events proved that the words of a prophet should have been heeded, people preserved the inspired words so that future generations would not make the same mistakes again, for they knew that their future depended on their listening to God's word and obeying God's will.

However, they did not limit themselves to the careful preservation of the words of YHWH spoken through the prophet. Because they saw YHWH's word as a living word, through which the living God continued to speak to them, they felt free to clarify, comment on, and update the text. Their aim was to make the prophet's words more accessible and more relevant to their contemporaries. Furthermore, they included these additions within the text itself. There are some signs of this re-application in the Amos and Hosea scrolls. It is far more obvious in the Isaiah scroll. Leaving aside chapters 40-66 which everyone acknowledges were composed generations after the time of Isaiah, even parts of chapters 1-39 (the chapters covered in this commentary) did not originate with Isaiah. A stand out example are the oracles against Babylon found in chapters 13-14. Babylon's rise to power happened a century after Isaiah's time.

There are many indications in the Isaiah scroll that help us connect Isaiah's words with contemporary events. Chapter 6 of the Isaiah scroll records a prophetic call received by Isaiah 'in the year that King Uzziah died' (6:1), that is, in the year 734. In the Introduction (page 11) we noted the economic prosperity experienced in Judah during Uzziah's reign, a prosperity enjoyed also in the northern kingdom during the reign of Uzziah's contemporary, Jeroboam II, who died in 748. Amos was active during Jeroboam's reign and Hosea's ministry began in Jeroboam's final years as king. Both these prophets denounced the injustice that prevailed during these years of prosperity. The same theme is evident in the oracles recorded in the opening chapters of the Isaiah scroll. Like the oracles of Amos and Hosea mentioned above, these chapters speak out against injustice. They were probably spoken by Isaiah in the final years of Uzziah's prosperous reign.

Israel was going through a tumultuous time after the death of Jeroboam II in 748, with assassination following assassination as rival parties struggled to find the best way to respond to Assyria's westward aggression (see page 11). By contrast, accession to the throne of Judah passed peacefully from father to son. Uzziah's son, Jotham, ruled with his father during the years of Uzziah's forced retirement (749-734).

As noted in the Introduction (page 12), Israel and Syria attacked Judah in an effort to put their own puppet on the throne and force Judah into joining their anti-Assyrian alliance. Jotham died in 734, and was succeeded by his son, Ahaz. The Syro-Ephraimite alliance as it is called increased pressure on Judah. We have seen Hosea's response to these events from the perspective of Israel. Chapters 7-9 of the Isaiah scroll give us his reactions from a Judah perspective.

Isaiah's ministry continued through the years of massive migration of refugees from Israel during and after the siege and fall of Samaria (724-721). The Assyrian army put down a revolt by the Philistine city of Ashdod (713-711). Isaiah warned King Hezekiah against Judah getting involved. He did so in dramatic style by moving around Jerusalem dressed (undressed) like a prisoner of war (see Isaiah 20:1-6). Isaiah's final oracles (see 37:21-35) were spoken during the reign of the Assyrian king, Sennacherib, who succeeded Sargon II in 705. The death of Sargon led to revolts in every section of the Assyrian Empire. Hezekiah seems to have played a significant role in organising rebellion against Assyria. Isaiah was active in attempting to deter him from a policy which he saw as a failure to trust in YHWH. Hezekiah went ahead and Judah was devastated by the Assyrian army in 701. Jerusalem itself survived, probably because, when Lachish was conquered, Hezekiah surrendered and paid a huge tribute (see 2Kings 18:14-16). The Assyrian army was also needed back in Assyria. This marks the end of Isaiah's prophetic ministry which endured through forty years, from about 740 to the end of the eighth century.

#### Inspired by Isaiah?

While Hosea was carrying out his prophetic ministry in Israel, Isaiah was challenging Judah. At first the situation in Judah was not as dire as in Israel. Assyria saw no advantage in attempting to overrun either the mountainous terrain or the deserts of Judah. To confront Egypt it was enough to conquer and occupy the transverse valley of Jezreel, the Megiddo Pass and the Philistine country bordering the Mediterranean. This was to change in the final years of the eighth century, when Judah suffered the fate of its northern neighbour. However, from the first invasion of Israel by Assyria, Judah was not free to sit on the sidelines. Israel kept trying to involve Judah in an anti-Assyrian alliance. A number of Isaiah's oracles address this situation (see especially chapters 7-9).

We are not in a position to assess the value of Isaiah's political stance. What we do know, and what we can learn from, is his insistence that the key response of Judah to its situation (indeed the key response of any of us in any situation in which we might find ourselves) is to put their trust in YHWH, their liberating God. Isaiah kept insisting that Judah's identity as a nation is defined by its covenant with God. Before all else, they must honour this covenant and place their trust in God. This is perhaps Isaiah's greatest contribution, then and now (see 7:9; 8:13; 9:13; 10:20; 12; 17:7-8; 25:1-10; 30:16; 31:1-3; 32:17; 33:22; 38:20).

Isaiah has a lot to say about what he understands as divine punishment. Chapters 13-23 ('oracles against the nations') are almost entirely devoted to this theme. God, as Isaiah saw him, has little time for Judah's enemies. Judah's enemies are, by definition, YHWH's enemies (see 10:5-19; 11:14; 25:10-12; yet, see the extraordinary statement in 19:24!).

## Introduction to Isaiah

Isaiah sees what is happening in Judah as God's punishment for the infidelity of its leaders and people. The reader is referred to the Introduction page 14 where we examined the assumption that whatever happens is organised by God. Of course, we can learn from this the important lesson that what we do matters, and that we cannot pretend away the consequences of our actions. However, Isaiah has much more to say about punishment than forgiveness (see all of chapters 24 and 34; also 26:21). We listen in vain for the stunning call of Jesus for us to be like God in loving out enemies (Matthew 5:44-45). Faithful to the tradition, Isaiah understands punishment as a way of getting people to change their mind, heart and behaviour (see 35:1-10). He is constantly bemoaning the failure of the people to repent (see 9:13). He is amazed at the folly of human pride (2:5-17; 3:16-17; 10:33-34). He saw the devastation of Judah as proof that his preaching had fallen on deaf ears (see 6:9-12). It is perhaps this that explains his almost unrelenting focus on punishment. His contemporaries continued to reject God's word (see 30:8-14).

Like Amos and Hosea, Isaiah speaks out against injustice, especially injustice that hides behind compliance with law (see 1:15-18; 3:13-15; 4:15; 5:1-23; 10:1-2; 29:17-21). As individuals and as people who are to some extent responsible for the institutions that govern our lives, we need to take Isaiah's criticisms to heart.

Like Amos and Hosea he also castigates religious practice that pays no attention to obedience to the will of God as expressed in the covenant (see 1:10-14; 5:24; 28:7ff; 29:13). It is this love-covenant with YHWH that is the reason for Israel's existence.

Isaiah joins Amos and Hosea in underlining the folly of worshipping 'gods' of our own making (see 2:8).

Isaiah speaks of God's love for his people (see 5:1-2; 30:18). His conviction that YHWH is faithful encouraged him to trust that all would, one day, be restored (see 1:18-19, 26; 2:1-4; 4:2-6; 5:4; 10:24-27; 11:1-13; 28:5-6; 30:18-26; 35).

# **ISAIAH 1-12**

**<sup>1</sup>The vision of Isaiah son of Amoz, which he saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah.**

Isaiah's prophetic ministry in Judah began in the last years of the reign of Uzziah, continued through the reigns of his son and grandson, Jotham and Ahaz, and finished during the reign of Hezekiah. His ministry, therefore, covered the last 40 or so years of the eighth century (see the Introduction, pages 100-101).

The word 'vision' (יִּזְוֹן, ḥ<sup>a</sup>zôn) recalls the words used to introduce the prophecies of Amos, where we are told that he 'had visions' (יִּזְוֹן, ḥāzâ). Amos was also called a 'seer' (יִּזְוֵה, ḥōzeh, Amos 7:14). Like Amos, Isaiah was 'enlightened' by YHWH, and, in turn, was given the mission to 'enlighten' the people.

The name 'Isaiah' (יִּשְׂאִיָּהּ, y<sup>ʿ</sup>ša'yāhû) is formed from the verbal stem yš' and means 'may YHWH save' (or 'YHWH will save'). The Bible is full of examples of word play on personal names. Salvation will be a key theme in Isaiah (see especially 12:1-13).

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

**<sup>2</sup>Hear, O heavens, and listen, O earth; for YHWH is speaking:**

There are echoes in verse 2 of the opening words of Moses' declaration to 'all Israel':

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

– Deuteronomy 32:1

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

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

When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son. The more I called him, the more he went from me ... Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk, I took him up in my arms; but he did not know that it was I who healed him. I led him with cords of human kindness, with bands of love. I was to him like one who lifts an infant to his cheek. I bent down to him and fed him.

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

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

– Hosea 9:15

See, too, Deuteronomy:

You forgot the God who gave you birth.

– Deuteronomy 32:18

In verse 4 Isaiah accuses the nation of being 'sinful' (חַטָּאִים, ḥoṭe'), a word that will recur in verses 18 and 28 and a further ten times in the Isaiah scroll. The word 'iniquity' (אֲוִן, 'āwôn) will recur 24 times. Both words speak of the exact opposite of holiness, the quality that should characterise the people of the 'Holy One of Israel' – an expression that recurs in the temple liturgy:

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

– Psalm 71:22

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

– Psalm 78:41

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

– Psalm 89:18

**<sup>2</sup>I reared children and brought them up, but they have rebelled against me.**

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

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

Repentance requires more than the cult

**<sup>5</sup>Why do you seek further beatings? Why do you continue to rebel? The whole head is sick, and the whole heart faint. <sup>6</sup>From the sole of the foot even to the head, there is no soundness in it, but bruises and sores and bleeding wounds; they have not been drained, or bound up, or softened with oil. <sup>7</sup>Your country lies desolate, your cities are burned with fire; in your very presence aliens devour your land; it is desolate, as overthrown by foreigners.**

**<sup>8</sup>And Daughter Zion is left like a booth in a vineyard, like a shelter in a cucumber field, like a besieged city. <sup>9</sup>If YHWH of hosts had not left us a few survivors, we would have been like Sodom, and become like Gomorrah.**

**<sup>10</sup>Hear the word of YHWH, you rulers of Sodom! Listen to the teaching of our God, you people of Gomorrah! <sup>11</sup>What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices? says YHWH; I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the suet of fattened beasts; I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs, or of goats. <sup>12</sup>When you come to appear before me, who asked this from your hand? Trample my courts no more; <sup>13</sup>bringing offerings is futile; the smoke of your sacrifices is an abomination to me. New moon and sabbath and calling of convocation – I cannot endure solemn assemblies with iniquity. <sup>14</sup>Your new moons and your appointed festivals my soul hates; they have become a burden to me, I am weary of bearing them.**

Isaiah is pleading with the people to turn back to their God.

The ‘foreigners’(verse 7) may be those who were imported in 701 into the towns of Judah by Sennacherib from Philistia, according to the Assyrian custom of mixing up populations to make resistance difficult.

Isaiah has been using the image of a sick body to describe the sick situation in Judah. Only Jerusalem (‘Daughter Zion’) is left standing, and it is like a temporary lean-to in a vineyard. It could collapse at any time. He sees this as God’s ‘punishment’ for their infidelity. They could have been left utterly destroyed, like Sodom and Gomorrah (see Genesis 19:24; also Amos 4:11).

From verse 10 the critique becomes sharper. It is directed at the whole people, but especially the political and religious leaders. The word translated ‘teaching’ here is *tôrâ*. Is this a sarcastic reference to the aspects of the Torah stressed by the priests? Isaiah goes on to declare that true change of mind and heart is what is required, not increased devotion to the cult. The essence of his critique is expressed in the words: ‘I cannot endure assemblies with iniquity’(verse 13). It is not the cult that is the problem. It is that people are using it as a substitute for genuine obedience to the Torah.

Isaiah is echoing the critique of Amos (see especially Amos 5:21-24; also 8:5, where he speaks of the sabbath and the new moon).

The words ‘make yourselves clean’(verse 16) are a call for interior purification:

All in vain I have kept my heart clean.

– Psalm 73:13

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

– Job 15:14

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

– Proverbs 20:9

The essential purification is made evident in social justice. Verses 16-17 also echo Amos (see Amos 5:14-15). We recall Jesus’ judgment:

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

– Matthew 23:23

Verse eighteen could also be translated: ‘If your sins are like scarlet, shall they be like snow? If they are red like crimson, shall they become like wool?’ If this is how Isaiah meant his words to be taken, he is telling them that they are fooling themselves. We might compare Jeremiah 2:22.

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

If, on the other hand, we should understand his words as a statement, Isaiah is putting the accent on what could happen if we really changed.

In speaking of Jerusalem as a ‘whore’, Isaiah is using a term frequently found in Hosea, his contemporary in the northern kingdom (see Hosea 3:3; 4:10-15; 5:3; 9:1). We cannot sin as though it has no consequences. We might try to pretend, but there is no way that God can.

The subversion of justice, especially by the taking of bribes is a favourite theme of Amos (see Amos 5:7, 10,12; 6:12).

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

**<sup>15</sup>When you stretch out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood. <sup>16</sup>Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean.**

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

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

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

**<sup>21</sup>How the faithful city has become a whore! She that was full of justice, righteousness lodged in her – but now murderers! <sup>22</sup>Your silver has become dross, your wine is mixed with water. <sup>23</sup>Your princes are rebels and companions of thieves. Everyone loves a bribe and runs after gifts. They do not defend the orphan, and the widow’s cause does not come before them.**

They must accept YHWH's purification

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

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

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

It is obvious that Judah is incapable of achieving repentance on its own. Isaiah assures them that YHWH will bring about the necessary purifying. The 'faithful city' that became a whore because of injustice (1:21) will once again be a place where justice prevails, 'a faithful city'.

It is God's justice that will redeem Zion. Those who obstinately resist God will be 'consumed.'

Verse 29 refers to the Canaanite cult that continued on in Judah as it did in Israel (see Hosea 4:13). It is their infidelity to the covenant they have with YHWH that is bringing about the burning up of their land. If they do not accept their suffering as a purification, and repent, there is worse to come.

Verse 1 appears to be the title for the scroll that predated the addition of chapter 1.

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

Verses 2-4 drawn on two themes that recur throughout the Isaiah scroll. The first theme is Jerusalem as the cosmic mountain at the centre of the world.

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

– Isaiah 11:9

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

– Isaiah 25:6 (see also 30:29 and 37:32)

The second theme is YHWH dwelling in Jerusalem.

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

– Isaiah 4:5 (see also 8:18 and 18:7)

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

– Isaiah 24:23

Verses 2-4 pick up two other key themes that are found in the material composed later by members of the Isaiah School: the mission to the nations (see 45:14, 22-23; 56:7; and 60:3-7); and instruction radiating out from Jerusalem (see 51:4).

**<sup>1</sup>The word that Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem.**

**<sup>2</sup>In days to come the mountain of YHWH's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it.**

**<sup>3</sup>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.**

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

Introduction to Isaiah 2:5 – 4:1

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

– Deuteronomy 18:14

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

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

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

– Deuteronomy 32:15, 18

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

First Exhortation (2:5-6)

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

First Description (2:6-9)

**<sup>6</sup>Indeed they are full of diviners from the east and of soothsayers like the Philistines, and they clasp hands with foreigners. <sup>7</sup>Their land is filled with silver and gold, and there is no end to their treasures; their land is filled with horses, and there is no end to their chariots. <sup>8</sup>Their land is filled with idols; they bow down to the work of their hands, to what their own fingers have made. <sup>9</sup>And so people are humbled, and everyone is brought low.**

Second Exhortation (2:9-10)

**<sup>9</sup>Do not raise your eyes to them! <sup>10</sup>Go to the Rock, and stay hidden in the dust in terror of YHWH, and of the glory of his majesty.**

The day of YHWH

Judgment (2:11-21)

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

<sup>12</sup>For YHWH of hosts has a day against all that is proud and lofty, against all that is lifted up and high; <sup>13</sup>against all the cedars of Lebanon, lofty and lifted up; and against all the oaks of Bashan; <sup>14</sup>against all the high mountains, and against all the lofty hills; <sup>15</sup>against every high tower, and against every fortified wall; <sup>16</sup>against all the ships of Tarshish, and against all the beautiful craft.

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

<sup>18</sup>The idols shall utterly pass away.

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

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

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

The ‘day’ of YHWH was expected to be a day when YHWH would intervene decisively to overthrow Israel’s adversaries. Isaiah speaks of it as a day when YHWH will judge Israel (see Amos 5:18-20).

Verse 11 is typed in *italics* to highlight its use as a refrain (repeated in verse 17). As in Israel under Jeroboam II, so in Judah under Uzziah, the nation was experiencing unprecedented economic prosperity, much of it brought in by the ‘ships of Tarshish’ (verse 16) – ships capable of traversing the Mediterranean.

People prided themselves in the wealth that trade brought to them, and not on the relationship they had with YHWH. Isaiah is warning them that their pride would be humbled, and they would learn the fragility of economic prosperity: ‘YHWH alone will be exalted on that day’.

A second refrain is repeated in verses 19 and 21. If they do not ‘go to the Rock’ (2:10) they will find themselves fleeing to the rocks in a vain attempt to hide from YHWH’s judgment.

Third Exhortation (2:22)

<sup>22</sup>Turn away from man in whose nostrils is breath, for what is it worth?

## Second Description

## Deportation and Anarchy (3:1-9)

This list seems to describe the kinds of people that were deported by the Assyrians after a military expedition. Is Isaiah referring to the situation after the devastation of Judah in 701 by Sennacherib?

Verses 4-9 describe the anarchy that follows on the deportation of the leading citizens.

**<sup>1</sup>For now the Sovereign, YHWH of hosts, is taking away from Jerusalem and from Judah support and staff [all support of bread, and all support of water - a gloss?] <sup>2</sup>warrior and soldier, judge and prophet, diviner and elder, <sup>3</sup>captain of fifty and dignitary, counsellor and skillful magician and expert enchanter.**

**<sup>4</sup>And I will make boys their princes, and babes shall rule over them. <sup>5</sup>The people will be oppressed, one by another and everyone by a neighbour. <sup>5</sup>the youth will be insolent to the elder, and the base to the honourable. <sup>6</sup>Someone will even seize a relative, a member of the clan, saying, "You have a cloak; you shall be our leader, and this heap of ruins shall be under your rule." <sup>7</sup>But the other will cry out on that day, saying, "I will not be a healer; in my house there is neither bread nor cloak; you shall not make me leader of the people." <sup>8</sup>For Jerusalem has stumbled and Judah has fallen, because their speech and their deeds are against YHWH, defying his glorious presence. <sup>9</sup>The look on their faces bears witness against them; they proclaim their sin like Sodom, they do not hide it. Woe to them! For they have brought evil on themselves.**

## Fourth Exhortation (3:10-11)

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

Third description:

The powerful exploit the poor (3:12-15)

**<sup>12</sup>My people – children are their oppressors, and women rule over them. O my people, your leaders mislead you, and confuse the course of your paths.**

**<sup>13</sup>YHWH rises to argue his case; he stands to judge the peoples. <sup>14</sup>YHWH enters into judgment with the elders and princes of his people: It is you who have devoured the vineyard; the spoil of the poor is in your houses. <sup>15</sup>What do you mean by crushing my people, by grinding the face of the poor? says the Lord YHWH of hosts.**

Judgment (3:16 – 4:1)

**<sup>16</sup>YHWH said: Because the daughters of Zion are haughty and walk with outstretched necks, glancing wantonly with their eyes, mincing along as they go, tinkling with their feet; <sup>17</sup>the Lord will afflict with scabs the heads of the daughters of Zion, and YHWH will lay bare their secret parts.**

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

**<sup>24</sup>Instead of perfume there will be a stench; and instead of a sash, a rope; and instead of well-set hair, baldness; and instead of a rich robe, a binding of sackcloth; instead of beauty, shame. <sup>25</sup>Your men shall fall by the sword and your warriors in battle. <sup>26</sup>And her gates shall lament and mourn; ravaged, she shall sit upon the ground. <sup>4:1</sup>Seven women shall take hold of one man in that day, saying, "We will eat our own bread and wear our own clothes; just let us be called by your name; take away our disgrace."**

This indictment of social injustice goes to the heart of Israel's identity as the people of YHWH, the one who hears the cry of the poor. We find the same criticism coming from the prophet Amos who challenged his contemporaries in Israel at the time when, under Jeroboam II, they were enjoying even greater prosperity than Judah (see Amos 2:6-8; 6:4-7; 8:4-6).

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

Like 2:1-4, this oracle is written from a post-exilic perspective. Isaiah's dire warnings went unheeded. Jerusalem was captured in 598, and razed to the ground in 587. Its leading citizens were deported to Babylon. With Babylon's capitulation to Cyrus of Persia, a remnant returned to Judah to rebuild the city and the temple. The worst is over. The shadow of the past hangs over them, and its lessons must not be forgotten, but YHWH's fidelity to his people has opened up for them a new future.

After the exile Judah was a small province in the western satrapy of the vast Persian Empire. Because of its obvious political weakness, those who wanted to inspire hope for a glorious future looked towards YHWH's intervention, the way they understood him to have intervened to 'miraculously' bring them home from exile to Judah, against all the odds.

Jeremiah and Ezekiel use the word 'shoot' (verse 2) in reference to the scion of the Davidic line who carried the hope of eventual restoration (see Jeremiah 23:5; 33:15-16; Ezekiel 29:21). Zechariah uses it of Zerubbabel, the governor of Judah and grandson of the exiled king, Jehoiachin (Zechariah 3:8; 6:12; see Psalm 132:17). The authors of the Isaiah School, however, are referring more broadly to the renewed growth of restored Judah (see also Isaiah 61:11). The Aramaic Targum translates 'shoot' (šemaḥ) as mešîaḥ ('messiah').

Verse 4 picks up the language used by Isaiah 3:16 in referring to the towns of Judah as 'daughters of Zion'.

It is significant that the verb 'create' (bārâ) is used in verse 5. God replaces chaos with order. He will be among them protecting them, as he was among his people in the wilderness:

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

– Exodus 13:21

The sign of God's protective presence is no longer confined to the temple. It covers the whole mountain and the whole assembly (see, in the New Testament, the Book of Revelation 21:22-27).

#### Oracle of Salvation (4:2-6)

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

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

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

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

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

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

**<sup>5</sup>And now I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard. I will remove its hedge, and it shall be devoured; I will break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down. <sup>6</sup>I will make it a waste; it shall not be pruned or hoed, and it shall be overgrown with briars and thorns; I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain upon it.**

**<sup>7</sup>For the vineyard of YHWH of hosts is the house of Israel, and the people of Judah he expected justice, but saw a cover up; righteousness, but heard a cry!**

Chapter five functions as a prologue to chapters six to twelve. It begins (verses 1-2) with an accusation sung by a friend of someone who is a cheated lover. The owner of the vineyard is a 'dear friend' (yādîd) of the singer. The owner's beloved is Israel, his vineyard (see 1:8, 3:14). Following an ancient literary convention, the vineyard is used as a metaphor for the female body.

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

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

In verses 3-6 the owner of the vineyard responds to the song.

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

You shall build a house, but not live  
in it. You shall plant a vineyard,  
but not enjoy its fruit ... You shall  
plant vineyards and dress them, but  
you shall neither drink the wine nor  
gather the grapes, for the worm shall  
eat them.  
— Deuteronomy 28:30, 39

The Hebrew word translated 'cover up' (verse 7) occurs only here. A related verb means 'to make scabby'. Isaiah is particularly strident in his condemnation of injustice that has the appearance of being just. The words used look and sound almost the same, but are in fact just the opposite. YHWH expected justice (מִשְׁפָּט, mišpāt), but saw a cover up (מִשְׁפָּח, mišpāḥ). He expected righteousness (דָּאָקָה, ṣ̣' dāqâ), but hear a cry (אָקָה, ṣ̣' āqâ). Typically, the prophets are critical of injustice that has the appearances of following the law.

## Woe Oracles (Isaiah 5:8-25)

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

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

## Economic Injustice (Isaiah 5:8-19)

Isaiah's contemporary, Micah, also speaks out against those who are expanding their property while the poor are being disenfranchised (see Micah 2:1-5; 5:1-13). Amos criticises those who build palatial homes on land taken from the poor (see Amos 3:9-12).

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

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

**<sup>9</sup>YHWH of hosts has sworn in my hearing: Surely many houses shall be desolate, large and beautiful houses, without inhabitant. <sup>10</sup>For ten acres of vineyard shall yield but one bath, and a homer of seed shall yield a mere ephah.**

The haughty are humbled

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

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

**<sup>13</sup>Therefore my people go into exile without knowledge; their nobles are dying of hunger, and their multitude is parched with thirst. <sup>14</sup>Therefore Sheol has enlarged its appetite and opened its mouth beyond measure; the nobility of Jerusalem and her multitude go down, her throng and all who exult in her.**

**<sup>15</sup>People are bowed down, everyone is brought low, and the eyes of the haughty are humbled. <sup>16</sup>But YHWH of hosts is exalted by justice, and the Holy God shows himself holy by righteousness.**

Morning is the time, before work begins in the fields, when court cases are heard in the town square. Instead of pursuing justice, they pursue luxury, and at the expense of the poor who are denied justice. Excessive drinking is criticised by Amos and Hosea in Israel:

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

– Amos 4:1

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

– Hosea 7:5

See also Isaiah’s contemporary in Judah:

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

– Micah 2:11

Amos, too, criticises those who spend their days in luxury, with no regard for what God is doing in their world (see Amos 6:1-7).

Exile is a regular threat because when Assyria conquered a territory it was their practice to deport the leading citizens, as well as anyone useful for their war effort. It happened to the people of the northern kingdom in Transjordan and in Israel. It happened in Judah in 701. Amos makes the same threat again and again in chapters 1-2, as well as in 4:2-6 and 6:7.

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

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

#### Judicial Injustice (Isaiah 5:20-24)

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

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

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

#### YHWH's Anger (Isaiah 5:25)

The final sentence of this verse appears as a refrain in Isaiah 9:12, 17 and 21. The idea of divine 'punishment' has already appeared in Isaiah. This is the first time we have met the expression 'the anger of YHWH'. To speak of divine anger is to speak of God's passionate concern for justice. God's initiative is always to put things right. To speak of divine anger is to speak of the terrible things that we bring upon ourselves and others when we reject God's inspiration and act against the truth. This terrible situation (this 'anger') is 'of God' in the sense that it is related to God and is the result of our failure to welcome God's grace and live in God's love. Talk of divine anger reminds us that God hates sin, and that we should hate sin as that which cuts us off from God, the source of life and of all that is good.

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

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

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

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

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

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

**<sup>26</sup>He will raise an *ensign* for a nation far away, and whistle for a people at the ends of the earth; Here they come, swiftly, speedily! <sup>27</sup>None of them is weary, none stumbles, none slumbers or sleeps, not a loincloth is loose, not a sandal-thong broken; <sup>28</sup>their arrows are sharp, all their bows bent, their horses' hoofs seem like flint, and their wheels like the whirlwind. <sup>29</sup>Their roaring is like a lion, like young lions they roar; they growl and seize their prey, they carry it off, and no one can rescue. <sup>30</sup>They will roar over it on that day, like the roaring of the sea. And if one look to the land – only darkness and distress; and the light grows dark with clouds.**

The Assyrian Threat  
(Isaiah 5:26-30)

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

Isaiah's commission (6:1-13)

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

As noted in the Introduction, King Uzziah had to retire in 749 (see 2Kings 15:1-7). He died in 734. ‘Seraphs’ (š̄rapîm) derives from the verb ‘to burn’ (š̄rap). In one of the stories of the wilderness journey, it is used to describe serpents whose bite caused a horrible burning (see Deuteronomy 8:15; Numbers 21:6, 8). These two scenes may be related, for a bronze serpent was kept as a cult object in the temple to commemorate that healing (see 2Kings 18:4). This may account for the imagery used here.

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

Isaiah was not listened to – further proof of the hardness of heart of those to whom he was sent.

Jesus’ mission, too, appeared to fail, and for much the same reason. Matthew quotes this passage in relation to the people’s failure to listen to Jesus (see Matthew 13:14-15), as does John (12:40). Luke quotes it at the end of Acts, for Paul’s message, too, largely went unheeded (see Acts 28:26-27).

**<sup>1</sup>In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. <sup>2</sup>Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their body, and with two they hovered. <sup>3</sup>And one called to another and said: “Holy, holy, holy is YHWH of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.”**

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

**<sup>5</sup>And I said: “Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, YHWH of hosts!”**

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

**<sup>8</sup>Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” And I said, “Here am I; send me!” <sup>9</sup>And he said, “Go and say to this people: ‘Keep hearing, without comprehending; keep seeing, without understanding.’ <sup>10</sup>Make the mind of this people dull, and stop their ears, and shut their eyes, so that they may not see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and comprehend with their minds, and change their ways and be healed.”**

The holy seed

**<sup>11</sup>Then I said, “How long, O Lord?” And he said: “Until cities lie waste without inhabitant, and houses without people, and the land is utterly desolate; <sup>12</sup>until YHWH sends everyone far away, and vast is the emptiness in the midst of the land.**

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

Here in Isaiah, God’s purpose is described. Against Isaiah’s advice, in order to fend off the attack from Israel and Syria (732), the leaders of Judah will call on Assyria. This will eventually lead (in 701) to terrible devastation and exile.

The final sentence of verse 13 (‘the holy seed is its stump’) appears to be an addition from the post-exilic editors. The returned exiles from Babylon are the ‘holy seed’ (see Ezra 9:2), the faithful few. They carry the hope of regeneration (see Isaiah 4:2-6; also 10:20-23; 11:11). They saw themselves as the ‘remnant’ spoken of by the post-exilic prophets:

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

– Haggai 2:2

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

– Zechariah 8:6

## Introduction to Isaiah 7-9

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

As noted in the Introduction (pages 11-12) the reign of King Tiglath-pileser III (744-727) was a period of Assyrian expansion. At first King Rezin of Syria had no choice but to submit to Assyria as a vassal state. However, he took the opportunity of Assyria's concentration on its eastern borders with Urartu and Media to break away and to organise an anti-Assyrian alliance, which King Pekah of Israel joined. In 734 the Assyrian army made a victorious sweep all along the Mediterranean coastline, conquering the Philistine cities and reaching to the borders of Egypt. Syria and Israel were now vulnerable from east and west, and King Rezin of Syria and King Pekah of Israel brought pressure to bear on Jotham, king of Judah, to join the alliance (see 2Kings 15:37-38). When Jotham died that same year, and was succeeded by his young son, Ahaz, Syria and Israel decided to invade Judah in order to depose Ahaz and set up a puppet regime. They besieged Jerusalem.

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

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

As it turned out a negative result of Ahaz's accepting to be a vassal state to Assyria was that his son, Hezekiah, in his well-intentioned attempt to initiate religious reform in Judah, felt compelled to break off the treaty with Assyria. He was tempted to do this in 713 when Sargon II (721-705) put down a rebellion in the Philistine city of Ashdod, but took Isaiah's advice and held back (see Isaiah 20:1-6).

## Israel and Syria attack Judah

However, with the death of Sargon in 705, Hezekiah judged that the moment was right to exert Judah's independence. He was wrong, and his fateful decision led to the devastation of Judah in 701 at the hands of Sargon's successor, Sennacherib (704-681). Sennacherib claims to have destroyed 46 fortified strongholds and taken 200,000 prisoners of war. Had Judah remained neutral in 732 this may not have eventuated. Isaiah's advice may well have been politically astute.

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

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

**<sup>3</sup>Then YHWH said to Isaiah, Go out to meet Ahaz, you and your son Shear-jashub, at the end of the conduit of the upper pool on the highway to the Fuller's Field, <sup>4</sup>and say to him, Take heed, be quiet, do not fear, and do not let your heart be faint because of these two smouldering stumps of firebrands, because of the fierce anger of Rezin and Aram and the son of Remaliah. <sup>5</sup>Because Aram—with Ephraim and the son of Remaliah—has plotted evil against you, saying, <sup>6</sup>Let us go up against Judah and cut off Jerusalem and conquer it for ourselves and make the son of Tabeel king in it. <sup>7</sup>therefore thus says the Lord YHWH: It shall not stand, and it shall not come to pass. <sup>8</sup>For the head of Aram is Damascus, and the head of Damascus is Rezin.**

**<sup>9</sup>(Within sixty-five years Ephraim will be shattered, no longer a people.)**

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

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

Translation loses the rhyme in the last sentence: 'If you do not stand firm in faith, you shall not stand at all'.

'im lo' ta'amînû  
ki lo' tē'amēnû

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

#### A sign (7:10-16)

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

The alliance Ahaz fears will soon collapse. Young mothers now expecting will be so confident that they will name their children 'Immanuel' ('God is with us'), and within a few years Syria and Israel will be deserted. 'almâ means 'a young woman' (see Genesis 24:43, referring to Rebekah; Exodus 2:8, referring to Moses' sister, and also Proverbs 30:19). betûlâ is the word for virgin.

It is possible that the 'young woman' that Isaiah is referring to is the wife of the king, Ahaz, and that the child is Hezekiah who was born in 733BC.

The Greek Version, however, translated 'almâ in this text as 'parthenos' (virgin). It was this that encouraged Matthew to cite this text in relation to Mary and Jesus in order to highlight the uniqueness of Jesus as God's Son (see Matthew 1:23). Matthew is not thereby stating that either Isaiah or those responsible for compiling the Isaiah scroll were referring to Mary and her son. It is a typical example of Jewish exegesis which sees deeper, divinely intended, meanings in a text that become clear in the light of further historical experience.

**<sup>9</sup>The head of Ephraim is Samaria, and the head of Samaria is the son of Remaliah. If you do not stand firm in faith, you shall not stand at all.**

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

**<sup>12</sup>But Ahaz said, I will not ask, and I will not put YHWH to the test.**

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

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

Do not rely on Assyria

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

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

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

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

**<sup>23</sup>On that day every place where there used to be a thousand vines, worth a thousand shekels of silver, will become briers and thorns.**

**<sup>24</sup>With bow and arrows one will go there, for all the land will be briers and thorns; <sup>25</sup>and as for all the hills that used to be hoed with a hoe, you will not go there for fear of briers and thorns; but they will become a place where cattle are let loose and where sheep wander at will.**

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

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

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

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

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

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

## Another sign (8:1-4)

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

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

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

<sup>1</sup>Then YHWH said to me, Take a large placard and write on it in large legible characters, "Belonging to Maher-shalal-hash-baz," <sup>2</sup>and have it attested for me by reliable witnesses, the priest Uriah and Zechariah son of Jeberechiah.

<sup>3</sup>And I went to the prophetess, and she conceived and bore a son. Then YHWH said to me, Name him Maher-shalal-hash-baz; <sup>4</sup>for before the child knows how to call "My father" or "My mother," the wealth of Damascus and the spoil of Samaria will be carried away by the king of Assyria.

<sup>5</sup>YHWH spoke to me again: <sup>6</sup>Because this people has refused the waters of Shiloah that flow gently, and rejoices in Rezin and the son of Remaliah; <sup>7</sup>therefore, the Lord is bringing up against it the mighty flood waters of the River, the king of Assyria and all his glory; it will rise above all its channels and overflow all its banks; <sup>8</sup>it will sweep on into Judah as a flood, and, pouring over, it will reach up to the neck; and its outspread wings will fill the breadth of your land, O Immanuel.

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

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

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

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

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

Isaiah and those who support him in siding neither with Syria-Israel nor with Assyria are being encouraged. YHWH on whom they trust is 'YHWH of hosts'. He can call on all the powers of heaven and earth to fight his cause.

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

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

Those wielding power in Jerusalem are consulting anything they can get their hands on, but they are failing to listen to YHWH who alone can give them 'teaching'(tôrâ) and 'instruction'(tê'ûdâ).

Description of the aftermath of the Assyrian invasion of 733 (8:21 – 9:1)

This is a powerful poetic description of the situation in northern Israel the threat of which caused Israel to try to force Judah to join in an anti-Assyrian alliance. In 734 Assyria took control of the Mediterranean coastline. The following year Tiglath-pileser III annexed Gilead, Galilee and the Esdraelon Plain (including the Valley of Jezreel). All that remained of Israel was the hill country of Samaria. The translation of 8:21 - 9:1 is a translation of an unpublished Italian version by Horacio Simian-Yofre SJ, professor in the Pontifical Biblical Institute, Rome.

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

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

In its original setting this may have been a prophetic oracle from Isaiah on the occasion of the birth of Ahaz's son, Hezekiah in 733. This would fit with the sign given earlier, in which 'Immanuel' may have also been referring to Hezekiah (see Isaiah 7:14). As the text stands it is so general as to be able to be reapplied to evoke hope at the birth of other princes to the house of David.

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

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

<sup>21</sup>**He [a nameless refugee] wanders across it [a nameless land], oppressed and hungry. Starving and desperate he curses his king and his God as he turns his face upward. <sup>22</sup>Downward to the earth he looks. Nothing but anguish, darkness, swirling oppression, confused gloom .**

<sup>9:1</sup>**There is no glimmer of light for an oppressed land: the humiliation of the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali; oppression in the Way of the Sea, in Transjordan and in the Galilee of the nations".**

<sup>2</sup>**The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those dwelling in a land of deep darkness – light has dawned.**

<sup>3</sup>**You have enlarged the nation, you have increased its joy; they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as people exult when dividing plunder. <sup>4</sup>For the yoke of their burden, and the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian.**

<sup>5</sup>**For all the boots of the tramping warriors and all the garments rolled in blood shall be burned as fuel for the fire. <sup>6</sup>For a child is born for us, a son given to us.**

Throne names of the king

**<sup>6</sup>Authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.**

**<sup>7</sup>His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom. He will establish and uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time onward and forevermore.**

**The zeal of YHWH of hosts will do this.**

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

The language here is echoed in Psalm 72:

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

– Psalm 72:5,7

He will reign on David’s throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with just decrees (mišpāt) and righteousness (šēdāqā’).

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

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

– Luke 1:32-33

## Judah fails to learn I (9:8-12)

Isaiah seems to be referring to two recent disasters that have fallen on Israel. This description of the first disaster sounds like a reference to an earthquake. Amos seems to be referring to it when he challenges the people to return to YHWH – a challenge they ignored (see Amos 3:15 and 6:11). After the first disaster they confidently rebuilt only to be struck by a second one. The description seems to refer to a military incursion from Syria and Philistia, perhaps on the death of Jeroboam II (746).

The last sentence returns as a refrain (see 9:17).

## Judah fails to learn II (9:13-17)

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

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

**<sup>8</sup>The Lord sent a word against Jacob, and it fell on Israel; <sup>9</sup>and all the people knew it – Ephraim and the inhabitants of Samaria – but in pride and arrogance of heart they said: <sup>10</sup>“The bricks have fallen, but we will build with dressed stones; the sycamores have been cut down, but we will put cedars in their place.”**

**<sup>11</sup>So YHWH raised adversaries against them, and stirred up their enemies, <sup>12</sup>the Arameans on the east and the Philistines on the west, and they devoured Israel with open mouth.**

*For all this his anger has not turned away; his hand is stretched out still.*

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

**<sup>17</sup>That is why the Lord did not have pity on their young people, or compassion on their orphans and widows; for everyone was godless and an evildoer, and every mouth spoke folly.**

*For all this his anger has not turned away, his hand is stretched out still.*

## Judah fails to learn

**9:18**For wickedness burned like a fire, consuming briars and thorns; it kindled the thickets of the forest, and they swirled upward in a column of smoke. **19**Through the wrath of YHWH of hosts the land was burned, and the people became like fuel for the fire; no one spared another. **20**They gorged on the right, but still were hungry, and they devoured on the left, but were not satisfied; they devoured the flesh of their own kindred; **21**Manasseh devoured Ephraim, and Ephraim Manasseh, and together they were against Judah. *For all this his anger has not turned away; his hand is stretched out still.*

**10:1**Ah, you who make iniquitous decrees, who write oppressive statutes, **2**to turn aside the needy from justice and to rob the poor of my people of their right, that widows may be your spoil, and that you may make the orphans your prey!

**3**What will you do on the day of punishment, in the calamity that will come from far away? To whom will you flee for help, and where will you leave your wealth, **4**so as not to crouch among the prisoners or fall among the slain? *For all this his anger has not turned away; his hand is stretched out still.*

## Judah fails to learn III (9:18-21)

This is the climax which takes us to the last days before the collapse of Israel and the destruction of Samaria in 721. The language is that of covenant curses (see Deuteronomy 28:53-57). They have severed their bond with YHWH, and this is the consequence (compare Amos 4:11).

## Judah fails to learn IV (10:1-4)

This picks up the theme of 5:8-24 and takes us to the heart of Isaiah's critique. That Israel did not listen is shown by the way those in leadership neglect the needy. Care for the poor is of the essence of Yahwism. Isaiah is not alone in speaking out against the servants of the state (whether in the court or in the temple) who manipulate the legal system to secure the advantage of the rich and powerful and have no care for God's poor:

In verse 3, 'calamity' translates the Hebrew *šō'â* (the term used to describe the Nazi holocaust of the Second World War).

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

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

Earlier themes are repeated in verses 5-6: YHWH's anger (see 5:25; 9:12, 17, 21); a rod for punishment (9:4); the godless people (9:17); Isaiah's child's symbolic name 'Maher-shalal-hash-baz' ('Quick spoils - speedy plunder', 8:1-4); tread down (5:5; 7:25). In 732 those listening to Isaiah would have been thinking of Israel as 'the godless nation'. In 701, they would have had to apply this to themselves.

The boast of the Assyrian king (verses 8-11) illustrates Assyrian pride.

Sargon II conquered the Hittite city, Carchemish, and the Syrian cities, Arpad and Damascus in 717. What is to stop Assyria conquering Calno and Hamath (also in Syria; see Amos 6:2), as well as Samaria, the capital of Israel, and Jerusalem, the capital of Judah? The Assyrian king boasts that the gods of Israel and Judah are no match for the gods of Assyria!

Verse 11 would appear to fit some time after 721, for Samaria has already fallen. Verses 12-14 insist that, while God is using Assyria to punish Israel and Judah, Assyria will also be punished and its pride brought low.

<sup>5</sup>Ah, Assyria, the rod of my anger – the club in their hands is my fury!

<sup>6</sup>Against a godless nation I send him, and against the people of my wrath I command him, to take spoil and seize plunder, and to tread them down like the mire of the streets.

<sup>7</sup>But this is not what he intends, nor does he have this in mind; but it is in his heart to destroy, and to cut off nations not a few. <sup>8</sup>For he says: "Are not my commanders all kings? <sup>9</sup>Is not Calno like Carchemish? Is not Hamath like Arpad? Is not Samaria like Damascus? <sup>10</sup>As my hand has reached to the kingdoms of the idols whose images were greater than those of Jerusalem and Samaria, <sup>11</sup>shall I not do to Jerusalem and her idols what I have done to Samaria and her images?"

<sup>12</sup>When YHWH has finished all his work on Mount Zion and on Jerusalem, he will punish the arrogant boasting of the king of Assyria and his haughty pride. <sup>13</sup>For he says: "By the strength of my hand I have done it, and by my wisdom, for I have understanding; I have removed the boundaries of peoples, and have plundered their treasures; like a bull I have brought down those who sat on thrones. <sup>14</sup>My hand has found, like a nest, the wealth of the peoples; and as one gathers eggs that have been forsaken, so I have gathered all the earth; and there was none that moved a wing, or opened its mouth, or chirped."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### Later editorial comments (10:20-27a)

1. There will always be some in Israel and Judah who will 'lean on YHWH in truth' (verse 20).

2. Judah had to face Assyria's anger when Hezekiah refused to pay tribute in 704. Assyria should fear YHWH's anger.

3. Are verses 26-28 a reference to Judah under the Ptolemies (late fourth century)?

## Assyria's advance (10:27-34)

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

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

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

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

Introduction to Isaiah 11:1-9

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

**<sup>1</sup>A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. <sup>2</sup>The spirit of YHWH shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of YHWH. [<sup>3</sup>His delight shall be in the fear of YHWH.]**

In the deepest sense, wisdom (ḥokmâ) is an openness to receive revelation.

True understanding (bînâ) can come only from communion with the divine. It is insight into the implications of divine revelation for one's own life and for the life of the community. Wisdom and understanding/insight are two traditional kingly gifts

The king is like the angel of God, discerning good and evil.  
– 2Samuel 14:17 (re David)

I give you a wise and discerning mind/heart.  
– 1Kings 3:12 (re Solomon)

All Israel heard of the judgment that the king had rendered; and they stood in awe of the king, because they perceived that the wisdom of God was in him, to execute justice.  
– 1Kings 3:28 (re Solomon)

I have good advice and sound wisdom; I have insight, I have strength.  
– Proverbs.8:14

Counsel ('ētsâ) is the ability to plan well. It opens a person to the inspiration of God's Spirit guiding one's decisions.

Might (g<sup>e</sup>bûrâ) is the capacity to carry out the plans once made. These are also two traditional kingly gifts

He is named Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God.  
– Isaiah 9:5

I have good advice and sound wisdom; I have insight, I have strength.  
– Proverbs.8:14

Knowledge (da'at) refers especially to knowing God's will.

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

The fear of YHWH is the beginning of wisdom.

– Proverbs 9:10

The fear of YHWH is the fountain of life.

– Proverbs 14:27

The fear of YHWH is hatred of evil.

– Proverbs 8:13

Do not be afraid. God has come only to test you and to put Fear of YHWH upon you so that you do not sin.

– Exodus 20:20

Happy are those who fear YHWH, who greatly delight in his commandments.

– Psalm 112:1

Let those who fear YHWH say: His steadfast love endures forever.

– Psalm 118:2

YHWH looks on those who fear him, on those who hope in his love.

– Psalm 33:18

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

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

**<sup>6</sup>The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. <sup>7</sup>The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. <sup>8</sup>The infant shall play over the hole of the cobra, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den. <sup>9</sup>They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of YHWH as the waters cover the sea.**

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

'Righteousness' (šedeq) is featured in the opening chapter:

How the faithful city has become a whore! She that was full of justice, righteousness lodged in her— but now murderers! ... I will restore your judges as at the first, and your counselors as at the beginning. Afterward you shall be called the city of righteousness, the faithful city.

– Isaiah 1:21, 26

'Faithfulness' ('ēmûnâ) is a sharing in the faithfulness of YHWH:

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

– Isaiah 25:1

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

Give the king your justice, O God, and your righteousness to a king's son. May he judge your people with righteousness, and your poor with justice. May the mountains yield prosperity for the people, and the hills, in righteousness. May he defend the cause of the poor of the people, give deliverance to the needy, and crush the oppressor ...

For he delivers the needy when they call, the poor and those who have no helper. He has pity on the weak and the needy, and saves the lives of the needy. From oppression and violence he redeems their life; and precious is their blood in his sight.

The coexistence of powerful predatory animals with animals that are their natural prey, and the safety of a child with a venomous serpent, are images for the paradise God intended, if only people had 'knowledge of YHWH'.

## Appendices to Isaiah 11:1-9

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

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

Pathros is Upper (southern) Egypt. Cush (Nubia) is part of today's Sudan. Shinar is Quwait and southern Iraq. Elam is east of Mesopotamia. Babylon is in Shinar. Hamath is in northern Syria. The 'coastlands' refers to the Phoenician coastal regions; or if 'islands' is meant, it may refer to the Aegean islands. In an earlier scene YHWH 'extended his hand' in anger (5:25). Now he is reaching out to gather all his people back to the Promised Land. The 'signal' (verse 12) links back to 11:10.

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

The combined forces of Judah and Israel will dominate both sides of the Jordan.

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

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

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

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

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

## Return of the remnant

**11:15 And YHWH will utterly destroy the tongue of the sea of Egypt; and will wave his hand over the River with his scorching wind; and will split it into seven channels, and make a way to cross on foot; 16so there shall be a highway from Assyria for the remnant that is left of his people, as there was for Israel when they came up from the land of Egypt.**

**12:1 You will say in that day: I will give thanks to you, YHWH, for though you were angry with me, your anger turned away, and you comforted me. 2Surely God is my salvation; I will trust, and will not be afraid, for YH YHWH is my strength and my might; he has become my salvation.**

Verses 15-16 go even further and speak of YHWH drying up of the Red Sea ('the tongue of the sea of Egypt'), and making a highway to cross the Tigris and the Euphrates for the coming home of all those deported in earlier times.

### Isaiah 12: Conclusion to Isaiah 1-11

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

#### Psalm One (12:1-2)

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

Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God.

– Isaiah 40:1

The people are being summoned to rejoice, for Assyria was, indeed, defeated, as was Babylon. It will be the same for all who oppress YHWH's people. They must put their trust in their God. The return to Judah was a Second Exodus (see Isaiah 42:10-13; 49:13):

The word 'salvation' (y<sup>š</sup>û'â) links back with the word 'Isaiah' (y<sup>š</sup>a'yāhû) in the opening verse of the scroll (Isaiah 1:1) forming an envelope for the opening section. It is a quote from the song celebrating the escape from Egypt:

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

– Exodus 15:2

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

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

– Psalm 118:21

## Link (12:3)

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

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

– John 7:37-39

## Psalm Two (12:4-6)

The following words were sung in the temple:

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

– Psalm 105:1

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

– Psalm 148:13

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

**<sup>3</sup>With joy you will draw water  
from the wells of salvation.**

**<sup>4</sup>And you will say in that day:  
Give thanks to YHWH, call on  
his name; make known his  
deeds among the nations; pro-  
claim that his name is exalted.  
<sup>5</sup>Sing praises to YHWH, for he  
has done gloriously; let this be  
known in all the earth.**

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

