

ISAIAH 28-35

¹Ah, the proud garland of the drunkards of Ephraim, and the fading flower of its glorious beauty, which is on the head of those bloated with rich food, of those overcome with wine! ²See, the Lord has one who is mighty and strong; like a storm of hail, a destroying tempest, like a storm of mighty, overflowing waters; with his hand he will hurl them down to the earth. ³Trampled under foot will be the proud garland of the drunkards of Ephraim. ⁴And the fading flower of its glorious beauty, which is on the head of those bloated with rich food, will be like the first ripe fig before the summer; whoever sees it, eats it up as soon as it comes to hand.

⁵In that day YHWH of hosts will be a garland of glory, and a diadem of beauty, to the remnant of his people; ⁶and a spirit of justice to the one who sits in judgment, and strength to those who turn back the battle at the gate.

⁷These also reel with wine and stagger with strong drink; the priest and the prophet reel with strong drink, they are confused with wine, they stagger with strong drink; they err in vision, they stumble in giving judgment.

⁸All tables are covered with filthy vomit; no place is clean. ⁹Whom will he teach knowledge, and to whom will he explain the message? Those who are weaned from milk, those taken from the breast?

The Fall of Samaria (28:1-13)

It is rarely easy to locate confidently the historical setting of a text. The matter is complicated because an original piece was regularly reshaped to apply its message to a later generation in a different situation. Sometimes all scholars can do is make a stab in the dark. However, the situation that appears to fit the following sayings best is the period just after the Assyrian invasion of Israel and the collapse of the capital, Samaria, in 721. Isaiah is making the point that the dangerously foolish policies that brought about the fall of Israel are the kinds of policies that are being followed by the Jerusalem court. They will have the same outcome. Verses one to four paint a picture of a regime that is living in luxury totally oblivious of the destructive storm (Assyria) that God ('the Lord', 'adonay, 28:2) is gathering to bring about their destruction. The beautiful garland that is Ephraim is like the garland on the head of a senseless drunkard at a funery banquet. They don't seem to realise that they are celebrating the death of all they hold dear.

Verses 5-6 are inserted by a later editor. The people's true garland is YHWH. Those who survive the holocaust will enjoy communion with him and with those who live justly.

Isaiah goes on to criticise the priests and the prophets. The priests are supposed to instruct the people in the Torah. The prophets are supposed to intercede for the people, to listen to YHWH's word and to mediate it to the people through oracles. Both groups are too drunk to know what they are saying.

Perhaps it is better just to repeat the Hebrew of verseten (Hebrew reads from right to left):

צוֹ לְצוֹ צוֹ לְצוֹ קוֹ לְקוֹ קוֹ לְקוֹ זְעִיר שָׁם זְעִיר שָׁם
(šaw lāšāw šaw lāšāw qaw lāqāw qaw lāqāw ze‘êw šām ze‘êw šām)

People have a right to hear from the priests the law of God that it is their duty to know. They have a right to hear from the prophets words learned in prayer and communicated humbly and rightly, whatever the cost to the prophet. But both priest and prophet are providing religious legitimation for the policies favoured by the court. All the people get is the kind of repetition that one expects in a kindergarten. In fact it will get worse. All they will hear is the sound of a foreign and unintelligible tongue (Assyrian). YHWH wanted the people to enjoy ‘rest’ (m^cnûḥâ) – secure possession of the land and freedom from external threat, but they would not listen.

Verses eleven to twelve are quoted by Paul in 1 Corinthians 14:21.

The Jerusalem leaders are not listening
(28:14-22)

Some understand the ‘covenant with death’ to refer to an alliance with Egypt (see the Egyptian cult of Osiris). Others think locally of Mot, the Canaanite god of the underworld, and the way people turned to necromancy in times of distress. They are relying on the false visions of the prophets who tell them what they want to hear. The only true shelter is YHWH (see 25:4).

¹⁰For it is precept upon precept, precept upon precept, line upon line, line upon line, here a little, there a little.”

¹¹Truly, with stammering lip and with alien tongue he will speak to this people, ¹²to whom he has said, “This is rest; give rest to the weary; and this is repose”; yet they would not hear.

¹³Therefore the word of YHWH will be to them,

צוֹ לְצוֹ צוֹ לְצוֹ קוֹ לְקוֹ קוֹ לְקוֹ זְעִיר שָׁם זְעִיר שָׁם
in order that they may go, and fall backward, and be broken, and snared, and taken.

¹⁴Therefore hear the word of YHWH, you scoffers who rule this people in Jerusalem. ¹⁵Because you have said, “We have made a covenant with death, and with Sheol we have an agreement; ¹⁵when the overwhelming scourge passes through it will not come to us; for we have made lies our refuge, and in falsehood we have taken shelter.”

¹⁶Therefore thus says the Lord YHWH, See, I am laying in Zion a stone, a massive stone, a precious cornerstone, a sure foundation: "One who trusts will not waver." ¹⁷And I will make justice the measuring line, and righteousness the plumb line.

Hail will sweep away the refuge of lies, and waters will overwhelm the shelter.

¹⁸Then your covenant with death will be annulled, and your agreement with Sheol will not stand; when the overwhelming scourge passes through you will be beaten down by it. ¹⁹As often as it passes through, it will take you; for morning by morning it will pass through, by day and by night; and it will be sheer terror to understand the message. ²⁰For the bed is too short to stretch oneself on it, and the covering too narrow to wrap oneself in it. ²¹For YHWH will rise up as on Mount Perazim, he will rage as in the valley of Gibeon; to do his deed – strange is his deed! and to work his work – alien is his work! ²²Now therefore do not scoff, or your bonds will be made stronger; for I have heard a decree of destruction from the Lord YHWH of hosts upon the whole land.

²³Listen, and hear my voice; Pay attention, and hear my speech. ²⁴Do those who plough for sowing plough continually? Do they continually open and harrow their ground? ²⁵When they have levelled its surface, do they not scatter dill, sow cummin, and plant wheat in rows and barley in its proper place, and spelt as the border?

Verses 16-17 appear to be a later insertion. This is picked up in the New Testament (see Romans 9:33; 1Peter 2:6; 10:11; Matthew 21:42; Ephesians 2:20; 2Timothy 2:19).

The leaders of Jerusalem failed to heed Isaiah, but YHWH promises a new beginning (symbolised in a new construction), a community of the faithful remnant in which justice and righteousness would prevail. YHWH will destroy, but only in order to rebuild.

There is no way they can protect themselves from YHWH's judgment, for YHWH is intervening as he did for David at Mount Perazim (see 2Samuel 5:17-25) and for Joshua at Gibeon (see Joshua 10:10-15). Those interventions were in favour of Israel. This one will be, too, but it will appear strange, for it is an intervention to punish and destroy. Only when they look back will it make sense as a destroying in order to rebuild (hence 28:16).

From verse 24 it is clear that the following verses are composed to explain why it is that YHWH has to 'plough' and 'harrow' his people (as declared in the previous verses), and at the same time to reassure people that there is a season for ploughing and harrowing. It does not go on for ever, and its purpose is to ensure a harvest.

As we have noted already, in a world that assumes that God controls history, some justification for what they understood as God's use of violence had to be found. The best Isaiah or those who kept his words and compiled the scroll could do was to see it as chastisement with a view to purification and ultimately blessing. In any case, that is its hoped-for fruit.

28:26For they are well instructed; their God teaches them. **27**Dill is not threshed with a threshing sledge, nor is a cart wheel rolled over cummin; but dill is beaten out with a stick, and cummin with a rod. **28**Grain is crushed for bread, but one does not thresh it forever; one drives the cart wheel and horses over it, but does not pulverize it. **29**This also comes from YHWH of hosts; he is wonderful in counsel, and excellent in wisdom.

Jerusalem 701BC (29:1-8)

The name ‘Ariel’ (’arî’ēl) has a number of references. ’arî means ‘lion’, so ‘lion of God’ (’ēl). One thinks of the ‘Lion of Judah’ (Genesis 49:9). The sound is close to ‘city’ (’îr), so ‘City of God’. Ezekiel names the surface of the altar of sacrifice ‘Ariel’ (Ezekiel 43:15-16). Is Isaiah saying that Jerusalem will become a place of slaughter?

It will become clear in 30:1-7 that Isaiah is speaking of the siege of Jerusalem by Sennacherib in 701. He is remembering the time when David besieged the city (see 2Samuel 5:6-10).

The Assyrian records and the Hebrew Bible give a variety of accounts of the reasons behind the sudden lifting of the siege. Whatever the reason, the fact is that ‘in an instant, suddenly’ (29:5), the siege was lifted and Jerusalem survived when the rest of Judah had been devastated. This was interpreted as a miraculous intervention by YHWH.

Isaiah is making the point that Assyria’s military might is no more substantial than a dream. Real power lies with YHWH alone.

29:1 Ah, Ariel, Ariel, the city where David encamped! Add year to year; **2**Yet I will distress Ariel, and there shall be moaning and lamentation, and Jerusalem shall be to me like an Ariel. **3**And like David I will encamp against you; I will besiege you with towers and raise siegeworks against you.

4Then deep from the earth you shall speak, from low in the dust your words shall come; your voice shall come from the ground like the voice of a ghost, and your speech shall whisper out of the dust.

5But the multitude of your foes shall be like small dust, and the multitude of tyrants like flying chaff. And in an instant, suddenly, **6**you will be visited by YHWH of hosts with thunder and earthquake and great noise, with whirlwind and tempest, and the flame of a devouring fire. **7**And the multitude of all the nations that fight against Ariel, all that fight against her and her stronghold, and distress her, shall be like a dream, a vision of the night. **8**Just as when a hungry person dreams of eating and wakes up still hungry, or a thirsty person dreams of drinking and wakes up faint, still thirsty, so shall the multitude of all the nations be that fight against Mount Zion.

⁹Stupefy yourselves and be in a stupor, blind yourselves and be blind! Be drunk, but not from wine; stagger, but not from strong drink! ¹⁰For YHWH has poured out upon you a spirit of deep sleep; he has closed your eyes, you prophets, and covered your heads, you seers.

¹¹The vision of all this has become for you like the words of a sealed document. If it is given to those who can read, with the command, "Read this," they say, "We cannot, for it is sealed." ¹²And if it is given to those who cannot read, saying, "Read this," they say, "We cannot read."

¹³YHWH said: Because these people draw near with their mouths and honour me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me, and their worship of me is a human commandment learned by rote; ¹⁴so I will again do amazing things with this people, shocking and amazing. The wisdom of their wise shall perish, and the discernment of the discerning shall be hidden.

Unable, unwilling to see (29:9-14)

Isaiah is highly critical of the state sponsored 'prophets' who say what the court wants to hear and who do not listen to YHWH, and so fail to see what is happening. Verse ten is quoted by Paul in Romans 11:8.

Granted people did not listen to Isaiah and did not see what was coming, those responsible for the compiling of the Isaiah scroll have to look for some reason. Why did YHWH reveal the truth through Isaiah and yet will that people not listen? They assumed that if the prophecy was not heard God must have had some design in this. The following comment picks up their reflections. YHWH must have wanted Isaiah to speak out, but also wanted what he said to be like a sealed book that people did not know how to unseal or, even if they had unsealed it, would have found it beyond their comprehension. YHWH must have wanted Isaiah's words to be written down as a revelation for future generations to learn from.

The message of verses 11-12 has already been made in 8:16-18, and we will meet it again in 30:8-11. A further reflection blames their lack of comprehension on the superficiality of people's religious practice.

Shrewd judgment based on politics and diplomacy is not enough. They must listen to God whose often inscrutable ways are revealed through those whom he chooses, not through those who are part of the self-serving institution.

Jesus quotes verse 13 when he comes up against the same kind of incomprehension (see Mark 7:6-7; see also Colossians 2:22). Verse fourteen is quoted by Paul in 1 Corinthians 1:19.

The limitations of political ‘wisdom’
(29:15-24)

Paul draws on this imagery of the potter in Romans 9:20.

Just as land covered in forest (ya‘ar) can be turned into fertile land (karmel) for cultivation, so those who are ‘deaf’ can be changed (by YHWH) into people who hear. The text is focusing on those whose ‘wisdom’ is guiding the policies of the court. The day will come when the ‘lowly’ (‘anāwîm) and the ‘needy’ (‘ebyônîm) will be listened to and cared for by those who set policy. ‘On that day’, those who push their own agenda come what may, and those who scoff at the words of YHWH, and those who abuse the judicial system, ‘shall be no more’.

In the New Testament Luke chose a similar passage to describe Jesus’ mission:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me to
bring good news to the poor. He
has sent me to proclaim release to
the captives and recovery of sight
to the blind, to let the oppressed
go free.

– Luke 4:18 (see Isaiah 61:1)

And when the disciples of John the Baptist came to inquire who Jesus was, he said:

The blind receive their sight, the
lame walk, the lepers are cleansed,
the deaf hear, the dead are raised,
and the poor have good news
brought to them.

– Matthew 11:5

Just as Abraham was redeemed from idolary in Ur (verse 22), so shall Israel be redeemed.

¹⁵Ha! You who hide a plan too deep for YHWH, whose deeds are in the dark, and who say, “Who sees us? Who knows us?” ¹⁶You turn things upside down! Shall the potter be regarded as the clay? Shall the thing made say of its maker, “He did not make me”; or the thing formed say of the one who formed it, “He has no understanding”?

¹⁷Shall not Lebanon in a very little while become a fruitful field, and the fruitful field be as common as forest? ¹⁸On that day the deaf shall hear the words of a scroll, and out of their gloom and darkness the eyes of the blind shall see. ¹⁹The lowly shall obtain fresh joy in YHWH, and the neediest people shall exult in the Holy One of Israel. ²⁰For the tyrant shall be no more, and the scoffer shall cease to be; all those alert to do evil shall be cut off – ²¹those who cause a person to lose a lawsuit, who set a trap for the arbiter in the gate, and without grounds deny justice to the one in the right.

²²Therefore thus says YHWH, who redeemed Abraham, concerning the house of Jacob: No longer shall Jacob be ashamed, no longer shall his face grow pale. ²³For when he sees his children, the work of my hands, in his midst, they will sanctify my name; they will sanctify the Holy One of Jacob, and will stand in awe of the God of Israel. ²⁴And those who err in spirit will come to understanding, and those who grumble will accept instruction.

Do not look to Egypt

¹Oh, rebellious children, says YHWH, who carry out a plan, but not mine; who make an alliance, but against my will, adding sin to sin; ²who set out to go down to Egypt without asking for my counsel, to take refuge in the protection of Pharaoh, and to seek shelter in the shadow of Egypt;

³Therefore the protection of Pharaoh shall become your shame, and the shelter in the shadow of Egypt your humiliation. ⁴For though his officials are at Zoan and his envoys reach Hanes, ⁵everyone comes to shame through a people that cannot profit them, that brings neither help nor profit, but shame and disgrace.

⁶An oracle concerning the animals of the Negeb. Through a land of trouble and distress, of lioness and roaring lion, of viper and flying serpent, they carry their riches on the backs of donkeys, and their treasures on the humps of camels, to a people that cannot profit them. ⁷For Egypt's help is worthless and empty, therefore I have called her, "Rahab who sits still."

The foolishness of an alliance with Egypt
(30:1-7)

This text gives the historical setting for the oracles of chapters 28-30. When Sennacherib suppressed the revolt in Babylon led by Merodach-baladan II in 702 he was free to deal with rebellion in the west. Judah sent envoys to the Nubian Paroah Shebiktu, to Zoan (Tanis) in the eastern delta of the Nile, and to Hanes (Heraklopolis, 100ks south of Memphis). When the Egyptian army was defeated at Eltekah, near the coast of Palestine due west of Jerusalem, Judah was completely exposed. The Assyrians claim to have captured 46 towns and deported over 200,000 people. Isaiah could see this coming and tried, without success, to dissuade Hezekiah from following the advice of those who had unwarranted trust in Egypt's strength.

Verses 6-7 paint the picture of the delegation from Judah making its way to Egypt through the Negeb – a difficult journey with many dangers, and all to no good purpose.

Rahab is a mythical creature of chaos. She 'sits still', quite incapable of thwarting the designs of YHWH.

The ignored prophecy to be
kept for future generations
(30:8-14)

God's word must not be lost. Hezekiah did not listen, but others might (compare 8:6 and the words ignored by Ahaz thirty years earlier).

An ignominious defeat awaits
them (30:15-17)

YHWH waits to be gracious
(30:18)

Justice is not obvious here and now. But justice will prevail. We are not the only ones waiting. YHWH, too, 'waits to be gracious to you'.

There is an interesting piece of Jewish lore attached to this verse. The final word 'for him' (lô) is composed of two Hebrew letters, l and o, each of which has a numerical value (30 + 6). It is said that we can wait, for there are always thirty-six righteous people in the world, and it is they, unknown to themselves or to others, who maintain the world in existence.

⁸Go now, write it before them on a tablet, and inscribe it in a book, so that it may be for the time to come as a witness forever.

⁹For they are a rebellious people, faithless children, children who will not hear the instruction of YHWH; ¹⁰who say to the seers, "Do not see"; and to the prophets, "Do not prophesy to us what is right; speak to us smooth things, prophesy illusions, ¹¹leave the way, turn aside from the path, let us hear no more about the Holy One of Israel."

¹²Therefore thus says the Holy One of Israel: Because you reject this word, and put your trust in deceitful oppressors, and rely on them; ¹³therefore this iniquity shall become for you like a break in a high wall, bulging out, and about to collapse, whose crash comes suddenly, in an instant; ¹⁴its breaking is like that of a potter's vessel that is smashed so ruthlessly that among its fragments not a sherd is found for taking fire from the hearth, or dipping water out of the cistern.

¹⁵For thus said the Lord YHWH, the Holy One of Israel: In turning back and staying still you shall be saved; in quietness and in trust shall be your strength. But you refused ¹⁶and said, "No! We will speed upon horses" – therefore you shall speed – in flight! and, "We will ride upon swift steeds" – therefore your pursuers shall be swift! ¹⁷A thousand shall flee at the threat of one, at the threat of five you shall flee, until you are left like a flagstaff on the top of a mountain, like a lookout post on a hill.

¹⁸Therefore YHWH waits to be gracious to you; therefore he will rise up to show mercy to you. For YHWH is a God of justice; blessed are all those who wait for him.

[Verse 18 repeated from previous page]

¹⁸Therefore YHWH waits to be gracious to you; therefore he will rise up to show mercy to you. For YHWH is a God of justice; blessed are all those who wait for him.

¹⁹Truly, O people in Zion, inhabitants of Jerusalem, you shall weep no more. He will surely be gracious to you at the sound of your cry; when he hears it, he will answer you. ²⁰Though YHWH may give you the bread of adversity and the water of affliction, yet your Teacher will not hide himself any more, but your eyes shall see your Teacher. ²¹And when you turn to the right or when you turn to the left, your ears shall hear a word behind you, saying, "This is the way; walk in it." ²²Then you will defile your silver-covered idols and your gold-plated images. You will scatter them like filthy rags; you will say to them, "Away with you!"

²³He will give rain for the seed with which you sow the ground, and grain, the produce of the ground, which will be rich and plenteous. On that day your cattle will graze in broad pastures; ²⁴and the oxen and donkeys that till the ground will eat silage, which has been winnowed with shovel and fork. ²⁵On every lofty mountain and every high hill there will be brooks running with water—on a day of the great slaughter, when the towers fall. ²⁶Moreover the light of the moon will be like the light of the sun, and the light of the sun will be sevenfold, like the light of seven days, on the day when YHWH binds up the injuries of his people, and heals the wounds inflicted by his blow.

²⁷See, the name of YHWH comes from far away, burning with his anger, and heavy with a sense of doom; his lips are full of indignation, and his tongue is like a devouring fire; ²⁸his breath is like an overflowing stream that reaches up to the neck – to sift the nations with the sieve of destruction, and to place on the jaws of the peoples a bridle that leads them where they would not go.

Comment 1 (19-22)

This is an attempt by a post-exilic author to explain how verse eighteen will work out. Some interpret the 'teacher' as God. Could it be Isaiah ben Amoz – a teacher from the past whose preserved words are God's instrument in educating future generations?

Comment 2 (30:23-26)

Comment 3 - the end of Assyria (30:27-33)

Comment 3 continued

The 'burning place' (verse 33) is Topheth, a cultic site set up for ritual infanticide in the valley south of Jerusalem (see 2Kings 23:10; Jeremiah 7:31-33; 19:5-7).

Rely on YHWH not Egypt
(31:1-9)

Verses 4-5 assert that Judah belongs to YHWH and that he will not allow other predators to take Judah from him. This continues a pattern that is followed throughout this section: a threat or warning followed by an assurance – 28:14-15 followed by 28:16-17; 29:1-4 followed by 29:5-8; 29:15-16 followed by 29:17-21; 30:1-17 followed by 30:29-33; and now 31:1-3 followed by 31:4-5.

^{30:29}You shall have a song as in the night when a holy festival is kept; and gladness of heart, as when one sets out to the sound of the flute to go to the mountain of YHWH, to the Rock of Israel. ³⁰And YHWH will cause his majestic voice to be heard and the descending blow of his arm to be seen, in furious anger and a flame of devouring fire, with a cloudburst and tempest and hailstones. ³¹The Assyrian will be terror-stricken at the voice of YHWH, when he strikes with his rod. ³²And every stroke of the staff of punishment that YHWH lays upon him will be to the sound of timbrels and lyres; battling with brandished arm he will fight with him. ³³For his burning place has long been prepared; truly it is made ready for Molek, its pyre made deep and wide, with fire and wood in abundance; the breath of YHWH, like a stream of sulfur, kindles it.

^{31:1}Alas for those who go down to Egypt for help and who rely on horses, who trust in chariots because they are many and in horsemen because they are very strong, but do not look to the Holy One of Israel or consult YHWH! ²Yet he too is wise and brings disaster; he does not call back his words, but will rise against the house of the evildoers, and against the helpers of those who work iniquity. ³The Egyptians are human, and not God; their horses are flesh, and not spirit. When YHWH stretches out his hand, the helper will stumble, and the one helped will fall, and they will all perish together.

⁴For thus YHWH said to me, As a lion or a young lion growls over its prey, and – when a band of shepherds is called out against it – is not terrified by their shouting or daunted at their noise, so YHWH of hosts will come down to fight upon Mount Zion and upon its hill. ⁵Like birds hovering overhead, so YHWH of hosts will protect Jerusalem; he will protect and deliver it, he will spare and rescue it.

The ideal ruler

^{31:6}Turn back to him whom you have deeply betrayed, O people of Israel. ⁷For on that day all of you shall throw away your idols of silver and idols of gold, which your hands have sinfully made for you.

⁸“Then the Assyrian shall fall by a sword, not of humans; and a sword, not of humans, shall devour him; he shall flee from the sword, and his young men shall be put to forced labour. ⁹His rock shall pass away in terror, and his officers desert the standard in panic,” says YHWH, whose fire is in Zion, and whose furnace is in Jerusalem.

^{32:1}See, a king will reign in righteousness, and princes will rule with justice. ²Each will be like a hiding place from the wind, a covert from the tempest, like streams of water in a dry place, like the shade of a great rock in a weary land. ³Then the eyes of those who have sight will not be closed, and the ears of those who have hearing will listen. ⁴The minds of the rash will have good judgment, and the tongues of stammerers will speak readily and distinctly. ⁵A fool will no longer be called noble, nor a villain said to be honourable. ⁶For fools speak folly, and their minds plot iniquity: to practice ungodliness, to utter error concerning YHWH, to leave the craving of the hungry unsatisfied, and to deprive the thirsty of drink. ⁷The villainies of villains are evil; they devise wicked devices to ruin the poor with lying words, even when the plea of the needy is right. ⁸But those who are noble plan noble things, and by noble things they stand.

Insert on idolatry (31:6-7)

YHWH will see to Assyria's destruction (31:8-9)

'Rock'(verse 9) appears to be a metaphor for the Assyrian king. Is this text a reference to the 'miraculous' lifting of the siege of Jerusalem in 701 as told in 2Kings 37:36-38?

Then the angel of YHWH set out and struck down one hundred eighty-five thousand in the camp of the Assyrians; when morning dawned, they were all dead bodies. Then King Sennacherib of Assyria left, went home, and lived at Nineveh. As he was worshiping in the house of his god Nisroch, his sons Adrammelech and Sharezer killed him with the sword, and they escaped into the land of Ararat. His son Esar-haddon succeeded him.

The ideal ruler (32:1-8)

This takes us back to 6:10 (see also 29:9-12) which sums up the failure of Isaiah's contemporaries to see (they did not want to see) or to hear (they did not want to hear). Those compiling the Isaiah scroll are living in the hope of a king who will see and listen and create an environment in which justice and righteousness prevail, and thus be a faithful instrument of YHWH who is:

a refuge to the poor, a refuge to the needy in their distress, a shelter from the rainstorm and a shade from the heat.

– Isaiah 25:4

Judah has had too many leaders who are too stupid to know YHWH and his call to justice, or too evil to obey. The ideal ruler, as they go on to say, will be 'noble' and 'plan noble things' and 'stand by' them (32:8; compare 29:17-21).

A summons to mourn, but things will change (32:9-20)

The situation that appears to fit these verses best is the invasion by the Assyrian army in 701. Isaiah is calling on the women, married (nāšîm) and single (bānôt), to carry out their expected role as public mourners, for it is going to be a terrible time (compare 24:4-13).

Through YHWH's intervention, the siege of Jerusalem was lifted. Though Judah had been devastated, and Jerusalem had been through a terrible experience, YHWH did not abandon his people. Later editors saw this as a promise that could always be relied on. God was always ready to 'pour out on us the spirit from on high'.

The fate of a tyrant (33:1)

This is a catch-all verse for any tyrant – described in contrast to the ideal ruler of 32:1-8 and 33:17-24.

⁹Rise up, you women who are at ease, hear my voice; you complacent daughters, listen to my speech. ¹⁰In little more than a year you will shudder, you complacent ones; for the vintage will fail, the fruit harvest will not come. ¹¹Tremble, you women who are at ease, shudder, you complacent ones; strip, and make yourselves bare, and put sackcloth on your loins. ¹²Beat your breasts for the pleasant fields, for the fruitful vine, ¹³for the soil of my people growing up in thorns and briars; yes, for all the joyous houses in the jubilant city. ¹⁴For the palace will be forsaken, the populous city deserted; the hill and the watchtower will become dens forever, the joy of wild asses, a pasture for flocks; ¹⁵until a spirit from on high is poured out on us, and the wilderness becomes a fruitful field, and the fruitful field is deemed a forest.

¹⁶Then justice will dwell in the wilderness, and righteousness abide in the fruitful field. ¹⁷The effect of righteousness will be peace, and the result of righteousness, quietness and trust forever. ¹⁸My people will abide in a peaceful habitation, in secure dwellings, and in quiet resting places. ¹⁹The forest will disappear completely, and the city will be utterly laid low. ²⁰Happy will you be who sow beside every stream, who let the ox and the donkey range freely.

^{33:1}Ah, you destroyer, who yourself have not been destroyed; you treacherous one, with whom no one has dealt treacherously! When you have ceased to destroy, you will be destroyed; and when you have stopped dealing treacherously, you will be dealt with treacherously.

²YHWH, be gracious to us; we wait for you. Be our arm every morning, our salvation in the time of trouble.

³At the sound of tumult, peoples fled; before your majesty, nations scattered.

⁴Spoil was gathered as the locust gathers; like swarming locusts they settle upon it.

⁵YHWH is exalted, he dwells on high; he filled Zion with justice and righteousness;

⁶he will be the stability of your times, abundance of salvation, wisdom, and knowledge; the fear of YHWH is Zion's treasure.

⁷Listen! the valiant cry in the streets; the envoys of peace weep bitterly. ⁸The highways are deserted, travellers have quit the road. The treaty is broken, its oaths are despised, its obligation is disregarded.

⁹The land mourns and languishes; Lebanon is confounded and withers away; Sharon is like a desert; and Bashan and Carmel shake off their leaves.

¹⁰"Now I will arise," says YHWH, "now I will lift myself up; now I will be exalted.

¹¹You conceive chaff, you bring forth stubble; your breath is a fire that will consume you. ¹²And the peoples will be as if burned to lime, like thorns cut down, that are burned in the fire."

¹³Hear, you who are far away, what I have done; and you who are near, acknowledge my might.

A psalm of petition and praise
(33:2-6)

Judicial decisions were made in the square at the city gate in the morning. Is the psalmist praying to experience justice?

A scene of social and physical
disaster (33:7-13)

This would appear to be yet another description of the condition in Judah and Jerusalem after the Assyrian invasion of 701 (compare 32:9-14), brought on by Hezekiah breaking his oath to his Assyrian overlord.

Verse seven can also be translated 'Ariel's people cry for help in the streets, Salem's messengers are weeping bitterly'. Both 'Ariel' (Isaiah 29:1) and 'Salem' (Genesis 14:18; Psalm 76:2) are names for Jerusalem.

Verse 13 appears to be a later addition stressing the need of those listening to this text to attend to what YHWH has done in the history of their people.

How does one avoid the judgment?
(33:14-16)

Divine judgment has been a constant theme in the section commencing chapter 28. Here the question is asked: Who can avoid this judgment (this devouring fire, these flames that cannot be extinguished)? It is typical of Isaiah that the response focuses on social justice.

There is a parallel in the teaching of Jesus who declares that ultimately what matters is that:

I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.

– Matthew 25:35-36

A future without fear (33:17-24)

The unit 32-33 concludes as it began with the promise of a ruler who would establish the lordship of YHWH in Judah. The sound of the unintelligible Assyrian language will be nothing more than a memory, and there will be no one taking a census in order to organise payment of tribute to Assyria (or anyone else – for later generations hearing this text in the time of Persian or Greek occupation would be thinking of their contemporary situation). Verse twenty-one seems to envisage an extended Israel, the Israel of the promise (see Genesis 15:18) which reaches to the Mediterranean, the Red Sea and the Euphrates. Foreign vessels will not be a threat to them.

Verse 23 picks up the image of verse 21. Isaiah seems to be addressing the foreign ships and telling them they are not as powerful or unconquerable as they might imagine.

¹⁴The sinners in Zion are afraid; trembling has seized the godless: “Who among us can live with the devouring fire? Who among us can live with everlasting flames?” ¹⁵Those who walk righteously and speak uprightly, who despise the gain of oppression, who wave away a bribe instead of accepting it, who stop their ears from hearing of bloodshed and shut their eyes from looking on evil, ¹⁶they will live on the heights; their refuge will be the fortresses of rocks; their food will be supplied, their water assured.

¹⁷Your eyes will see the king in his beauty; they will behold a land that stretches far away. ¹⁸Your mind will muse on the terror: “Where is the one who counted (‘took the census’)? Where is the one who weighed the tribute? Where is the one who counted the towers?” ¹⁹No longer will you see the insolent people, the people of an obscure speech that you cannot comprehend, stammering in a language that you cannot understand. ²⁰Look on Zion, the city of our appointed festivals! Your eyes will see Jerusalem, a quiet habitation, an immovable tent, whose stakes will never be pulled up, and none of whose ropes will be broken. ²¹But there YHWH in majesty will be for us a place of broad rivers and streams, where no galley with oars can go, nor stately ship can pass. ²²For YHWH is our judge, YHWH is our ruler, YHWH is our king; he will save us. ²³Your rigging hangs loose; it cannot hold the mast firm in its place, or keep the sail spread out. Then prey and spoil in abundance will be divided; even the lame will fall to plundering. ²⁴And no inhabitant will say, “I am sick”; the people who live there will be forgiven their iniquity.

¹Draw near, O nations, to hear; O peoples, give heed! Let the earth hear, and all that fills it; the world, and all that comes from it. ²For YHWH is enraged against all the nations, and furious against all their hoards; he has doomed them, has given them over for slaughter. ³Their slain shall be cast out, and the stench of their corpses shall rise; the mountains shall flow with their blood. ⁴All the host of heaven shall rot away, and the skies roll up like a scroll. All their host shall wither like a leaf withering on a vine, or fruit withering on a fig tree.

⁵When my sword has drunk its fill in the heavens, lo, it will descend upon Edom, upon the people I have doomed to judgment. ⁶YHWH has a sword; it is sated with blood, it is gorged with fat, with the blood of lambs and goats, with the fat of the kidneys of rams. For YHWH has a sacrifice in Bozrah, a great slaughter in the land of Edom. ⁷Wild oxen shall fall with them, and young steers with the mighty bulls. Their land shall be soaked with blood, and their soil made rich with fat.

⁸For YHWH has a day of vengeance, a year of vindication by Zion's cause.

⁹And the streams of Edom shall be turned into pitch, and her soil into sulfur; her land shall become burning pitch. ¹⁰Night and day it shall not be quenched; its smoke shall go up forever. From generation to generation it shall lie waste; no one shall pass through it forever and ever.

Edom (34:1-17)

Blenkinsopp writes (page 450):

Chapters 34 and 35 belong together, comprising a recapitulation of the message of the book as understood in eschatological terms by a writer of the later Second Temple period.

In the fifth century BC, Edom had replaced Babylon as the 'evil empire'. The Edomites profited by the Babylonian conquest to occupy large parts of the Negeb of Judah. They may even have taken part in the destruction of Jerusalem in 587. The authors of chapter 34 take images and expressions from Isaiah concerning Assyria, as well as later references to Babylon, and re-work them to speak of the final annihilation of Edom. They are preparing their readers for chapter 35, which speaks of the ultimate well-being of Zion. The dreadful, blood-thirsty, imagery reflects the way of war in those times: survivors were butchered as an offering to the deity of the winning side. It is yet another example of how we make God in our own image.

Not surprisingly the author draws on imagery from the story of Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 19:24-25).

'Lilith' (verse 14) is a female demon feared among other things because she was said to steal children. The 'goat demons' are the 'satyrs' (sā'îr) of mythology.

It is not clear what 'the book of YHWH' (verse 16) refers to. However, the reference back to the preceding passage, which speaks about measuring out the region that belongs to the animals (see 34:11), points to it being a reference to a book (sēper) which contains the prophecy referred to concerning Edom. People are being invited to check what the writer is saying against an earlier written document. Together with 29:11-12, it is giving us a glimpse into an earlier stage in the process of the evolution of what ultimately became the Isaiah scroll.

The final restoration of Judah
(35:1-10)

As noted in introducing chapter 34, the idealised picture of a transformed Judah is in contrast to the idealised degradation of Edom. Both chapters belong to a late edition. Chapter 35 draws on images from Isaiah 40-55 (exilic writing of the Isaiah School): calling on the wilderness to rejoice (35:1-2; compare 42:11); encouragement (35:3-4; compare 40:9, 29-31); removal of blindness and deafness (35:5-6; compare 42:7, 18-20; 43:8); highway to Zion (35:8; compare 40:3). There are also comparisons that can be made with Isaiah 56-66 (post-exilic writing of the Isaiah School).

Verse 3 is quoted in the New Testament (Hebrews 12:12).

34:11 But the hawk and the hedgehog shall possess it; the owl and the raven shall live in it. He shall stretch the line of confusion over it, and the plummet of chaos over its nobles. ¹²They shall name it No Kingdom There, and all its princes shall be nothing. ¹³Thorns shall grow over its strongholds, nettles and thistles in its fortresses. It shall be the haunt of jackals, an abode for ostriches. ¹⁴Wildcats shall meet with hyenas, goat-demons shall call to each other; there too Lilith shall repose, and find a place to rest. ¹⁵There shall the owl nest and lay and hatch and brood in its shadow; there too the buzzards shall gather, each one with its mate.

¹⁶Seek and read from the book of YHWH: Not one of these shall be missing; none shall be without its mate. For the mouth of YHWH has commanded, and his spirit has gathered them. ¹⁷He has cast the lot for them, his hand has portioned it out to them with the line; they shall possess it forever, from generation to generation they shall live in it.

35:1 The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus ²it shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice with joy and singing. The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it, the majesty of Carmel and Sharon. They shall see the glory of YHWH, the majesty of our God. ³Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. ⁴Say to those who are of a fearful heart, "Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God. He will come with vengeance, with terrible recompense. He will come and save you."

⁵Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; ⁶then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.

For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert; ⁷the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water; the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp, the grass shall become reeds and rushes. ⁸A highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Holy Way; the unclean shall not travel on it, but it shall be for God's people; no traveller, not even fools, shall go astray.

⁹No lion shall be there, nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it; they shall not be found there, but the redeemed shall walk there. ¹⁰And the ransomed of YHWH shall return, and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

We find Jesus drawing on verse 6 in his response to the disciples of John the Baptist who come to him asking whether or not he is the awaited Messiah (see Matthew 11:5).

Similar language is used in the New Testament Book of Revelation 21:27.