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ISAIAH SCHOOL IN YEHUD

ISAIAH 56-66

Introduction to Isaiah 56-66

The School of prophet-preachers who composed Isaiah 40-55 wrote during the time of the Babylonian Exile. They kept insisting that YHWH would bring the exile to an end and restore Judah and Jerusalem. In the early part of their ministry (see chapters 40-48), they directed the people's hopes towards the Persian king, Cyrus, whom they described as YHWH's chosen instrument. In 539 Cyrus entered Babylon in triumph, and continued his policy of allowing peoples who had been deported to Babylon to return to their homelands. This included the exiles from Judah (see Ezra 6:3ff). A small group of exiles led by Sheshbazzar returned to Yehud, a much reduced Judah (see Ezra 1:5-11; 5:13-15; 1 Chronicles 3:18). The foundations of the Temple were laid, but the work was not continued (see Ezra 5:16).

It appears from chapters 49-55 that they lost hope in Cyrus, but not in YHWH. They kept faithful to their mission of keeping YHWH's promise before the attention of the people. Perhaps they never had much of a hearing, but in chapters 49-55 it is clear that they were scoffed at and rejected. However, they continued to trust that YHWH was, indeed, speaking through them.

Among the returned exiles were members of the School of exilic prophets who were responsible for Isaiah 40-55. It is to them and those who followed them that we owe chapters 56-66. They show no interest in a Davidic king. They look to YHWH to intervene and put things right. As we examine the text we will see many themes that are consistent with those of Isaiah 40-55, and a number of references to the prophecies found there. They continue to speak of the breaking in of a new age of salvation (compare 62:11-12 with the opening words of Isaiah 40). They continue to speak of the central role of Zion in the promised New Age (compare 62:1ff with 49:14ff). They see their ministry as 'servants' as a continuing of the ministry of the 'servants' of the exile (see 56:6; 63:17; 65:8, 13-15).

For the moment a comparison of the following texts will help to illustrate the close connection between this third part of the Isaiah scroll and Isaiah 40-55. Compare: 'See, your salvation comes; his reward is with him, and his recompense before him'(62:11) with 'See, YHWH God comes with might, and his arm rules for him; his reward is with him, and his recompense before him'(40:10). Compare also: 'The coastlands shall wait for me ... for the name of YHWH your God, and for the Holy One of Israel, because he has glorified you'(60:9) with 'You shall call nations that you do not know, and nations that do not know you shall run to you, because of YHWH your God, the Holy One of Israel, for he has glorified you'(55:5). We will note further parallels in the commentary.

Chapters 56-66 focus on the internal wranglings of the community back in Jerusalem. These chapters do not have a single author. The exhortations and criticisms come from a minority movement in Jerusalem that is discontent with the way things are working out since the erection of the Second Temple in 516, and the material seems to range from the return from exile through to the time of Ezra (458).

During this period Judah was under a governor appointed from Susa, the capital of the Persian Empire. It is important to remember that from the Persian point of view, the Second Temple was an instrument of Persian control in Judah and was under the authority of the governor, not the temple priests. Those who composed Isaiah 56-66 have nothing good to say about the leadership, including the temple priesthood (see Isaiah 63:18-19; 65:5,13-16; 66:5), and they rail against the prevailing religious compromise in the cult, and the rampant injustice that is contradictory to genuine Yahwism. However they were not in a position to do anything about it apart from complaining and continuing to point out the will of YHWH as expressed in the Torah and the Prophets. They shared the fate of those responsible for Isaiah 40-55, in that they were a persecuted and shunned minority. Things would change with the coming of Ezra (458), but that is another story.

Besides the continuing inspiration provided by the prophet-preachers of Isaiah 40-55, the authors of Isaiah 56-66 were strongly influenced by the post-exilic members of the Deuteronomic School. There are similarities in the homiletic style, though this may be because of the growing significance of the synagogues which provided an ambience for presenting one's ideas in an oratorical style appropriate for such a setting. Deuteronomic influence is seen especially in their religious concerns, notably their stress on the necessity of fidelity to the Law.

The salvation-hopes of the prophet-preachers of the Exile were not realised. Life in post-exilic Judah was defined by economic hardship (60:17; 62:8-9), insecurity in political life (60:10,18), ruin and devastation (61:4), and the burden of continuing shame (61:7, 62:4). Those who, back in Yehud, carried on the mission of the prophet-preachers of the Exile blamed the community, who failed to keep the sabbath (Isaiah 56:2-7; 58:3); failed to observe dietary laws (Isaiah 65:4; 66:17); had a false attitude to fasting (Isaiah 58:1-5); and were involved in immorality and idolatry (Isaiah 57:3-10,13; 65:1-7). Especially to blame were those responsible for cult (Isaiah 57:1-13; 58:1-5; 65:1-7; 66:1-4,17).

However, the members of the Isaiah School continued the proclamation of salvation. This salvation would be a historical one, though 60:19-20 and 65:16b-25 speak in more transcendent terms. It would affect the Gentiles (60:3; 60:9b; 60:6, 61:9, 62:2). Cult worship has a place in the promised state (60:7,13; 66:2:9), though it is not stressed the way others are stressing it at the time. God would come 'soon' (56:1) and directly intervene (63:1-6; 65:17-25; 66:12-16).

These final chapters of the Isaiah scroll have a special interest for Christians because of the way they were appealed to in the early years of the development of Jewish Christianity. Just as the authors in post-exilic Judah saw themselves as the ones who were being faithful to the life and mission confided to Israel by YHWH, and continued to point out the failures of the majority, so the Jews who followed Jesus saw themselves as the ones who were being faithful to their Jewish traditions by following the revelation they received through Jesus, the Messiah whom they believed was sent by YHWH to bring to its fulfilment the revelation contained in the Torah and the sayings of the prophets. They saw themselves as faithfully living out the mission given by God to Abraham, their 'father in faith'.

Introduction to Isaiah 56-66

Just as those responsible for Isaiah 56-66 kept appealing to the majority to be converted, so the authors of the New Testament, Paul especially, kept reaching out to their co-religionists to re-examine their traditions in the light of Jesus' life and teaching. Like the 'suffering servant', Jesus was scoffed at and rejected by the Jewish authorities. But, again like the suffering servant, in his patience, obedience, prayer and love he revealed who God really is, and opened Judaism up to the surrounding world, sending his disciples out to the nations to bring about the reign of God promised in the scriptures, and to take the blessing given to Israel to the whole world, as YHWH had promised Abraham in the beginning.

It was the similarity of the position of the minority Christian Jews to that of the prophet-servants responsible for Isaiah 56-66 that accounts for the use of their material in the New Testament and in the early Church. Our aim in this commentary is to attempt to present the material in these chapters as it was intended by its authors in the final years of the sixth century BC and during the first half of the fifth century. However, we will occasionally point to where the texts were used in early Christian writing.

Inspired by Isaiah 56-66?

This material is outstanding for its sense of the all-embracing ('catholic') mission confided by God to Judaism. This is clear from the opening chapter's attitude to foreigners and eunuchs (chapter 56). The temple is to be 'a house of prayer for all peoples' (56:8; see 60:3; 66:18). The Isaiah School is critical of the prevailing narrowness of the leadership of Yehud (see, for example, 56:9-12).

The authors are critical also of the compromises that were found in the cult (chapter 57). Fasting is no substitute for justice (chapter 58)

YHWH is offering peace and healing (see 57:19). If they are not experiencing communion with God it is their own fault. Their behaviour is 'grieving his holy spirit' (63:10).

Your iniquities have been barriers between you and your God, and your sins have hidden his face from you so that he does not hear ... Justice is turned back, and righteousness stands at a distance; for truth stumbles in the public square, and uprightness cannot enter.

– Isaiah 59:2, 14

This is the one to whom I will look, to the humble and contrite in spirit, who trembles at my word.

– Isaiah 66:2

There is the opportunity for a new beginning, for YHWH is bringing about a new creation (65:17; 66:20), a new redemption (59:20; 60:16; 61:1-2; 62:12).

The spirit of the Lord YHWH is upon me, because YHWH has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of YHWH's favour.

– Isaiah 61:1-2

¹Thus says YHWH:

Maintain justice, and do what is right,
for soon my salvation will come,
and my deliverance be revealed.

²Happy is the person who does this,
the one who holds it fast,
who keeps the sabbath, not profaning it,
and refrains from doing any evil.

³Do not let the foreigner joined to YHWH say,
"YHWH will surely separate me from his people";
and do not let the eunuch say,
"I am just a withered tree."

⁴For thus says YHWH:

To the eunuchs who keep my sabbaths,
who choose the things that please me
and hold fast my covenant,

⁵I will give, in my house and within my walls,
a monument and a name
better than sons and daughters;
I will give them an everlasting name
that shall not be cut off.

⁶And the foreigners who join themselves to YHWH,
to minister to him, to love the name of YHWH,
and to be his servants,

all who keep the sabbath, and do not profane it,
and hold fast my covenant —

⁷these I will bring to my holy mountain,
and make them joyful in my house of prayer;
their burnt offerings and their sacrifices
will be accepted on my altar;
for my house shall be called a house of prayer
for all peoples.

⁸Thus says the Lord YHWH,
who gathers the outcasts of Israel,
I will gather others to them
besides those already gathered.

This opening passage with its talk of the Sabbath, foreigners, eunuchs, YHWH's house, covenant, and house of prayer, is different from anything we have met so far in the Isaiah scroll. However the accent on justice has been a constant theme in both Isaiah 1-39 and Isaiah 40-55, as is the focus on YHWH's imminent intervention to bring about salvation. The word 'servants' (56:6) is significant. The authors are carrying on the traditions and the prophetic mission of the servants of the exile.

Trito- and Deutero-Isaiah

It is interesting to compare this opening passage with the opening passage of Isaiah 40. The focus is different, for Isaiah 40 looks forward to the ending of the exile and is an exhortation to prepare the way for YHWH to come and take the people home. The authors of Isaiah 56 are already back in Jerusalem. However the two passages share the same perspective on events. The authors here are convinced that ‘soon my salvation will come, and my deliverance be revealed’, just as the authors of Isaiah 40 were convinced that ‘the glory of YHWH shall be revealed’ (Isaiah 40:5). The authors here are confident in their faith that YHWH is present among his people, welcoming the outsiders into his house of prayer and gathering the outcasts of Israel, just as the authors of Isaiah 40 could exhort Jerusalem to tell the good news to the towns of Judah that ‘here is your God’ (40:9), for ‘the Lord YHWH is coming with might’ (40:10).

The message of the School during the exile was met with scepticism. This did not lessen the prophets’ confidence:

Listen to me, you stubborn of heart, you who are far from deliverance:
I bring near my deliverance, it is not far off, and my salvation will not tarry;
I will put salvation in Zion, for Israel my glory.

– Isaiah 46:12-13

I will bring near my deliverance swiftly,
my salvation has gone out and my arms will rule the peoples;
the coastlands wait for me, and for my arm they hope.
Lift up your eyes to the heavens, and look at the earth beneath;
for the heavens will vanish like smoke, the earth will wear out like a garment,
and those who live on it will die like gnats;
but my salvation will be forever, and my deliverance will never be ended.

– Isaiah 51:5-6

They, like the Deuteronomistic School, understood the delay as being the result of sin:

O that you had paid attention to my commandments!
Then your prosperity would have been like a river,
and your success like the waves of the sea.

– Isaiah 48:18

The authors of the post-exilic School understand things in the same way. Hence their exhortation to ‘maintain justice and do what is right’ (56:1).

Before examining the text more closely it is worth pointing out the connections between this opening passage and the closing passage of the Isaiah scroll (66:15-24). Those responsible for the final organising of the scroll have composed these two passages to act as a kind of envelope around the final, post-exilic, section of the scroll. In the final passage we hear again of the ‘servants’ (66:14; 56:6), and of YHWH’s imminent intervention (66:15-16; 56:1) which will be preceded by a gathering in of all the nations (66:18; 56:8). There, too, we hear of YHWH’s ‘holy mountain’, which is also his ‘house’ (66:20; 56:5,7). Once again foreigners are spoken of as ministers in the cult (66:21; 56:6), and observance of the Sabbath is given as the principal criterion for being a member of the Jewish community and sharing in its life (66:23; 56:2,4,6).

¹Thus says YHWH:

**Maintain justice, and do what is right,
for soon my salvation will come,
and my deliverance be revealed.**

This opening verse takes us to the heart of one of the most urgent concerns of the post-exilic disciples of the servant-prophets of the exile: the concern for social justice. In this they are in touch with a perception that is also at the heart of the religion of Israel. YHWH is the one who hears the cry of the poor, who redeems people from slavery. Yahwism is real only when it is expressed in sharing YHWH's response to the poor. This, perhaps more than anything else, provides the glue that keeps the three parts of the Isaiah scroll together. It is no accident that the introductory chapter (Isaiah 1) focuses so strongly on this theme. There are three key terms used in this verse: 'justice' (mišpāt), 'what is right' (šēdāqâ; translated 'deliverance' at the end of the verse), and 'salvation' (yēšû'â).

Justice is shown especially in care for those who are least able to care for themselves:

Seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.

– Isaiah 1:17

It includes access of the powerless to judicial process. Isaiah speaks out against those who acquit the guilty for a bribe, and deprive the innocent of their rights!

– Isaiah 5:23

Justice is the primary responsibility of rulers and governments. Isaiah declares:

A throne shall be established in steadfast love in the tent of David,
and on it shall sit in faithfulness a ruler who seeks justice
and is swift to do what is right.

– Isaiah 16:5

YHWH will give a spirit of justice to the one who sits in judgment.

– Isaiah 28:6

See, a king will reign in righteousness, and princes will rule with justice.

– Isaiah 32:1

The members of the Isaiah School of the exile have the same perspective:

Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights;
I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations.
He will not cry or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street;
a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench;
he will faithfully bring forth justice.
He will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice in the earth;
and the coastlands wait for his teaching.

– Isaiah 42:1-4

This is grounded on the belief that YHWH is a God of justice:

In the path of your judgments, YHWH, we wait for you;
your name and your renown are the soul's desire.
My soul yearns for you in the night, my spirit within me earnestly seeks you.
When your judgments are in the earth, the inhabitants of the world learn righteousness.

– Isaiah 26:8-9

Righteousness and salvation

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.

– Isaiah 30:18

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

– Isaiah 51:4

Doing ‘what is right’ (š^edāqâ, ‘righteousness’) in the social sphere is central to justice:

The vineyard of YHWH of hosts is the house of Israel,
and the people of Judah are his pleasant planting;
he expected justice, but saw bloodshed, righteousness, but found a cover-up!

– Isaiah 5:7

I will make justice the line, and righteousness the plummet.
Hail will sweep away the refuge of lies.

– Isaiah 28:17

Justice will dwell in the wilderness, and righteousness abide in the fruitful field.

– Isaiah 32:16

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

– Isaiah 33:5

If people do not ‘do what is right’, they will not avoid divine judgment. There will be a day of reckoning, when the power of the oppressor will be taken from them. This will be a day of ‘deliverance’ (š^edāqâ, 56:1) for those who were not treated justly:

Zion shall be redeemed by justice (mišpāt),
and those in her who repent, by righteousness (š^edāqâ).

– Isaiah 1:27

The verb h¹i¹a‘ (to ‘help’, ‘save’ ‘deliver’) and the noun y¹i¹‘ (‘help’, ‘salvation’, ‘deliverance’, ‘victory’), from the Hebrew root yī‘, speak of the presence and action of YHWH who answers a cry for help and who comes powerfully to his people to help them in their trouble. The accent is on YHWH’s bringing divine help to us in our difficulties, rather than on his protecting us from having to face them. The classical text is Exodus 14, which describes the action of YHWH at the Red Sea.

As Pharaoh drew near, the Israelites looked back, and there were the Egyptians advancing on them. In great fear the Israelites cried out to YHWH ... Moses said to the people, “Do not be afraid, stand firm, and see the *salvation* that YHWH will accomplish for you today; for the Egyptians whom you see today you shall never see again. YHWH will fight for you, and you have only to keep still ... Thus YHWH *saved* Israel that day from the Egyptians.

– Exodus 14:10, 13-14,30

In the writings of the exilic School we read:

How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace,
who brings good news, who announces *salvation*, who says to Zion, ‘Your God reigns’
... All the ends of the earth shall see the *saving help* of our God.

– Isaiah 52:7,10

Shower, O heavens, from above, and let the skies rain down righteousness;
let the earth open, that salvation may spring up,
and let it cause righteousness to sprout up also; I YHWH have created it.

– Isaiah 45:8

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

– Isaiah 45:22

Listen to me, you stubborn of heart, you who are far from deliverance:
I bring near my deliverance, it is not far off, and my salvation will not tarry;
I will put salvation in Zion, for Israel my glory.

– Isaiah 46:12-13

Lift up your eyes to the heavens, and look at the earth beneath;
for the heavens will vanish like smoke, the earth will wear out like a garment,
and those who live on it will die like gnats;
but my salvation will be forever, and my deliverance will never be ended ...
For the moth will eat them up like a garment, and the worm will eat them like wool;
but my deliverance will be forever, and my salvation to all generation.

– Isaiah 51:6, 8

‘Happy’ (‘*airê*’) is found in liturgical texts from the period of the Second Temple. It is to be distinguished from the older term ‘blessed’ (bar \square k), in that the focus of blessed is on what *God* does, whereas the focus of ‘happy’ is on what *we* are to do (or are doing) to receive God’s blessing by being faithful to the covenant (see the beatitudes, Matthew 5:3-11). To declare people ‘happy’ is to rejoice with them that they are in a state of communion with God. In this case, it is because they are acting justly by doing what is right.

²Happy is the person who does this, the one who holds it fast,

There is no mention of the sabbath in Isaiah 2-39 or Isaiah 40-55. It appears that it was during the exile, when there was no opportunity to practise the cult, that the sabbath came to be seen as the central act of observance of the covenant. Of course it could not be a substitute for justice – something made clear in Isaiah 1:13, and so the inclusion of ‘and refrains from doing any evil’.

who keeps the sabbath, not profaning it, and refrains from doing any evil.

³Do not let the foreigner joined to YHWH say, “YHWH will surely separate me from his people”; and do not let the eunuch say, “I am just a withered tree.”

This is our first indication of trouble within the community in post-exilic Judah. It was the leading citizens who were deported. When they returned they expected to be the leading citizens again. Those left behind who had taken over the land of those who were deported (not expecting their return) would have found the return difficult for obvious reasons. Then there was the radical change in the place of the Second Temple in the life of the community. It was no longer an instrument of the Davidic king, but was under the control of a governor appointed from Persia. Different families of priests jockeyed for power.

In a very restricted Judah they had to work out where they stood in relation to each other and to the newly erected temple and its cult. And there was always present a level of anxiety as people struggled to come to terms with why it was that YHWH abandoned them (as they understood it), and allowed the city and temple to be destroyed in 586.

It is clear from verse three that there was a strong lobby that saw a key problem in any kind of communion with those who were not ethnic Israelites. They were pushing to exclude from the people, and so from the temple, and probably from the synagogue and the sabbath, foreigners who adhered to the religion of YHWH. Since there is no indication that Israel ever practised castration, the ‘eunuchs’ mentioned are probably also foreigners. According to those wielding power in Jerusalem, eunuchs not only had no hope of children, but they should be deprived of spiritual communion with the religion to which they had been adhering. The post-exilic members of the School of prophet-preachers had inherited from their exilic teachers a more universalist view of God’s will:

This one will say, “I am YHWH’s,” another will be called by the name of Jacob,
yet another will write on the hand, “YHWH’s,” and
adopt the name of Israel.

– Isaiah 44:5

See also:

YHWH will have compassion on Jacob and will again choose Israel, and will set them in their own land; and aliens will join them and attach themselves to the house of Jacob.

– Isaiah 14:1

So they proclaim the following prophetic oracle.

They are fighting to keep alive the universalist view that they inherited. They are also fighting for justice for the oppressed. Foreigners are among the most vulnerable because they have no kinship group on which to rely. They are being told that there is no place for them in the temple ('my house'), which means that they have no place in the city either ('within my walls'). They are being 'cut off' from the community of Israel to which they have been adhering by observing the sabbath, by behaving in ways that please YHWH, and by holding fast to the covenant. By prefacing their words with 'thus says YHWH', the Isaiah School is declaring that they are responding to YHWH's inspiration when they declare that YHWH is not behind this exclusion.

There is a play on words in this text. The word *yād*, translated 'memorial' (verse 5), was also used for 'penis'. The word 'cut off' was used for a divine punishment whereby a person was cut off from the community now and his memory would be finally cut off in death. The eunuch has had his genitals cut off, but he is being assured that YHWH has not and will not cut him off from his people.

⁴For thus says YHWH:

To the eunuchs who keep my sabbaths, who choose the things that please me and hold fast my covenant, ⁵I will give, in my house and within my walls, a monument and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off.

**⁶And the foreigners who join themselves to YHWH,
to minister to him, to love the name of YHWH,
and to be his servants,
all who keep the sabbath, and do not profane it,
and hold fast my covenant—
⁷these I will bring to my holy mountain,
and make them joyful in my house of prayer;
their burnt offerings and their sacrifices
will be accepted on my altar;
for my house shall be called a house of prayer
for all peoples.**

Eunuchs and foreigners are excluded in Deuteronomy 23:1-9. Two things stand out in this passage. The first is that the ‘servants’ of YHWH include foreigners who have converted to Yahwism. It is being asserted that though they are foreigners they are eligible to take part in the cult (to ‘minister to YHWH’, see also Isaiah 66:21). Though the word ‘ethnic cleansing’ may be too strong, something like that was being pushed by those wielding power in the city and the temple. They were trying to exclude foreign converts from having a role in the temple cult. The disciples of the prophet are claiming that this is going against God’s will, and that YHWH will accept the sacrifices offered by foreigners who join themselves to YHWH, observe the sabbath and are faithful to the covenant.

The second thing to note is the shift that is occurring in regards to the way the temple was understood. It is still a place for public cult, but the focus now is on prayer, that is to say, on communal and personal communion with God that is not necessarily connected with sacrificial offerings. This, too, was a change brought about by the long years when there was no temple or sacrifices. YHWH speaks about ‘my house of prayer’, and insists that it is ‘for all peoples’, not just for those who can point to a genealogical chart to demonstrate that they are descendants of the citizens of Judah at the time of the monarchy and the First Temple. Verse seven is quoted by Jesus in his critique of the temple (see Mark 12:17). It is this universalist perspective that is highlighted in the final verse.

**⁸Thus says the Lord YHWH,
who gathers the outcasts of Israel,
I will gather others to them
besides those already gathered.**

YHWH wants to bring back all those of Israel who have been deported:

YHWH will raise a signal for the nations, and will assemble the outcasts of Israel,
and gather the dispersed of Judah from the four corners of the earth.

– Isaiah 11:12

He also wants to gather into the people those who are outcasts in other ways. Compare the following:

In that day, says YHWH, I will assemble the lame
and gather those who have been driven away, and those whom I have afflicted.

– Micah 4:6

I will deal with all your oppressors at that time.
And I will save the lame and gather the outcast,
and I will change their shame into praise and renown in all the earth.

– Zephaniah 3:19

YHWH builds up Jerusalem; he gathers the outcasts of Israel.

– Psalm 147:2

Finally, there is no limit to YHWH's love, for YHWH 'will gather others to them'. In this, as in other matters, they found agreement in the members of the Deuteronomistic School who composed the following prayer by Solomon:

When a foreigner, who is not of your people Israel, comes from a distant land because of your name — for they shall hear of your great name, your mighty hand, and your outstretched arm—when a foreigner comes and prays toward this house, then hear in heaven your dwelling place, and do according to all that the foreigner calls to you, so that all the peoples of the earth may know your name and fear you, as do your people Israel, and so that they may know that your name has been invoked on this house that I have built.

– 1Kings 8:41-43

Criticism of the 'prophets'

The prophet-preachers now turn on the official prophets attached to the temple and accuse them of failing to listen for YHWH's word and so failing to warn the people or properly guide those, including the leaders, who come to them expecting to discover God's will.

**⁹All you wild animals,
all you wild animals in the forest, come to devour!**

**¹⁰Israel's sentinels are blind,
they are all without knowledge;
they are all silent dogs
that cannot bark;
dreaming, lying down,
loving to slumber.**

**¹¹The dogs have a mighty appetite;
they never have enough.
The shepherds also have no understanding;
they have all turned to their own way,
to their own gain, one and all.**

**¹²"Come," they say, "let us get wine;
let us fill ourselves with strong drink.
And tomorrow will be like today,
great beyond measure."**

This statement may reflect the situation in the early years of the reign of Darius I (c. 520), when there were rebellions throughout the Persian Empire and the international system was very unstable – a situation that made Judah especially vulnerable to foreigners who, like 'wild animals in the forest', were keen 'to devour'. He likens the prophets to sentinels whose task it is to warn the city of attack (compare Ezekiel 3:16-21; 33:1-9). He likens them also to shepherds with their guard dogs, unable and unwilling to protect the flock (compare Ezekiel 34:1-10). This text may draw on Jeremiah 12:7-13.

This refers back to Isaiah 52:13 - 53:12. The post-exilic School seems to be referring primarily to itself as a community of 'the devout' ('anšê-ḥesed), rejected by the blind sentinels and uncaring shepherds mentioned in 56:9-12. The 'devout' are called elsewhere YHWH's 'faithful ones' (ḥasîdîm):

Precious in the sight of YHWH is the death of his faithful ones.

– Psalm 116:15

They are YHWH's servants ('abādîm, 56:6). Compare:

They have given the bodies of your servants to the birds of the air for food, the flesh of your faithful to the wild animals of the earth.

– Psalm 79:2

The lament is that people are so blind that they cannot see the value of what they have rejected; so evil, that they prefer to continue their sinful life rather than listen to the prophetic word, change their behaviour, and enjoy YHWH's promised blessing.

It is suggested that verse two is composed of three separate comments, added to clarify verse one.

1. This is a reflection on the death of the righteous one (Isaiah? A significant member of the School?). It echoes the following from the poem on the suffering servant:

Out of his anguish he shall see light; he shall find satisfaction.

– Isaiah 53:11

Is there here the beginnings of a deeper hope that the just will experience the peace of communion with God beyond death – a hope that will later find expression in the Book of Wisdom?

Their going from us to be their destruction; but they are at peace.

– Wisdom 3:3

They were caught up so that evil might not change their understanding or guile deceive their souls ... for their souls were pleasing to the Lord, therefore he took them quickly from the midst of wickedness.

– Wisdom 4:11, 14

2. This is a reflection on the death of 'the devout'. They, too, are at rest.

3. This is a further reflection on the life of the suffering servant.

¹The righteous one has perished, and no one takes it to heart; the devout are swept away, and no one gives it a thought. It was on account of evil that the righteous one was swept away.

²He enters into peace.

They repose in their final resting places.

He was upright in his conduct.

Critique of idolatrous cult (57:3-13)

The religion of Israel was unique in the ancient Near East in its refined sense of the transcendence of God. However, as the constant critique of the prophets illustrates, in fact superstition was widespread and all kinds of religious cult were practised. At times this was true even in the temple cult. This infidelity to the covenant with YHWH was considered the main sin that brought down upon the temple and the people the anger of YHWH, seen in his abandoning the temple and the city and allowing their destruction in 586. From the following critique it seems that things were no better in the early troubled years after the return from exile and the building of the Second Temple.

³But as for you, come here, you children of a sorceress, you offspring of an adulterer and a whore. ⁴Whom are you mocking? Against whom do you open your mouth wide and stick out your tongue? Are you not children of transgression, the offspring of deceit –

⁵you that burn with lust among the oaks, under every green tree;

you that slaughter your children in the valleys, under the clefts of the rocks? ⁶Among the smooth stones of the valley is your portion; they, they, are your lot; to them you have poured out a drink offering, you have brought a grain offering. Shall I be appeased for these things?

The prophets use an extended metaphor for their critique (compare Ezekiel 16 and 23). For ‘sorceress’ and ‘whore’ read Jerusalem; for ‘children’ read inhabitants of the city; for ‘adulterer’ read the various pagan gods to whom the people offered their cult. The sexual imagery refers primarily to infidelity to their true husband, YHWH, in their practice of pagan religious cult. The prophet-preachers of the exile spoke of Jerusalem as a wife who felt abandoned by her husband, but whom YHWH was promising to take back into intimate communion (see Isaiah 49:14-26). The contrast could hardly be more stark.

Verse five can also be translated: ‘you that seek consolation with the shades of the dead under every green tree’(compare Jeremiah 3:13). It depends on whether the verb is ḥāmam (‘burn with lust’) or nāḥam (‘console’). Also ’ēlīm can mean ‘oaks’, or it can be the plural of ’ēl and so mean ‘gods’ – a term applied to the spirits of the ancestors in the cult of the dead (see Isaiah 8:19).

There is evidence of the people resorting to ritual infanticide in the years preceding the fall of Jerusalem in 597 (see 2Kings 23:10), and offering to the gods of the underworld (see Psalm 16:4) blood libations in the valley of the Sons of Hinnom (Ge-ben-Hinnom, ‘gehenna’; Jeremiah 7:30-32). The prophet-preachers are reminding them of this, perhaps as a warning of where their idolatry is heading.

Unavoidably one thinks of the temple mount. The accusation is that their idolatry (the bed in which they are unfaithful) extends even into the temple itself. If so, this would be only a repetition of practices that went on in the temple during the reign of Manasseh, and, in spite of the reforms of Josiah, in the years leading up to the capture and then destruction of Jerusalem (see Ezekiel 8:9-17). It is likely that the critique is directed especially at cult of the dead, for *miškāb* can mean ‘grave’ as well as ‘bed’.

‘Doorpost’ is *m^ezûzâ* – a stark contrast with the night of the first Pasch when the blood of the Paschal lamb was painted on the doorposts (Exodus 12:7). Instead of having on their doorpost a symbol of their covenant commitment to YHWH, they have symbols of other gods to whom they look for advantage. ‘Doorpost’ also recalls the following instruction:

Hear, O Israel: YHWH is our God, YHWH alone.
You shall love YHWH your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

– Deuteronomy 6:4-9

As in verse seven ‘bed’ (*miškāb*) may include a reference to cult of the dead. ‘Uncovered’ can mean ‘undressed’. It can also refer to uncovering secrets (part of the superstition involved in the cult of the spirits of the dead). ‘Gone up to’ (your bed) can also be translated ‘raised up’ (spirits).

Molech was a Canaanite god of the underworld. Compare the following.

We have made a covenant with death, and with Sheol we have an agreement; when 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.

– Isaiah 28:15

⁷Upon a high and lofty mountain you have set your bed, and there you went up to offer sacrifice.

⁸Behind the door and the doorpost you have set up your symbol;

⁸for, in deserting me, you have uncovered your bed, you have gone up to it, you have made it wide; and you have made a bargain for yourself with them, you have loved their bed, you have gazed on their nakedness.

⁹You journeyed to Molech with oil, and multiplied your perfumes; you sent your envoys far away, and sent down even to Sheol.

¹⁰You grew weary from your many wanderings, but you did not say, "It is useless." You found your desire rekindled, and so you did not weaken.

¹¹Whom did you dread and fear so that you lied, and did not remember me or give me a thought?

Have I not kept silent and closed my eyes, and so you do not fear me? ¹²I will concede your righteousness and your works, but they will not help you. ¹³When you cry out, let your collection of idols deliver you! The wind will carry them off, a breath will take them away.

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

Since they were not experiencing YHWH's 'punishment', they were assuming everything was all right. They are being warned that the day will come when they will be called to account.

There is more to this last sentence that is immediately apparent. We need to remember the problem of apportioning land in the period after the return from exile. The temple authorities wielded considerable power, and owning land was closely linked to being in good standing in the worshipping community. This takes us back to the opening passage (56:1-8) and the School's speaking out against the push to exclude certain groups (notably foreigners, including eunuchs) from participation in the life of the community. Here in verse thirteen, they are insisting that in God's eyes it is 'whoever takes refuge in me' (not in Molech) that will 'possess the land' and be true worshippers on the temple mount.

After this severe criticism, the prophet-preachers, faithful to the teaching of their School, assert that forgiveness is always possible, because it is YHWH's desire to comfort, not to punish.

It is possible that the 'He' at the beginning of this passage is a reference to Isaiah ben Amoz who was continuing to speak his prophetic word through the prophets in exile, who spoke of the need to clear away obstacles (see Isaiah 40:1-5).

The Holy One who dwells in a high and holy place is the one who revealed himself to Isaiah in the temple (see Isaiah 6:1-3; 33:5). Isaiah's disciples are asserting that this transcendent God is present in those who are lowly-in-spirit, in the hearts of the contrite. Again and again throughout the Isaiah scroll we have been told that God will bring down (šāpal, 'make low') the proud. The text here in verse fifteen is the only time that šāpal is used to describe a person's 'spirit' (rūaḥ). This occurs in only two other texts of the Hebrew Bible, both in Proverbs:

It is better to be of a lowly spirit among the poor than to divide the spoil with the proud.

– Proverbs 16:19

Pride will bring humiliation, but one who is lowly in spirit will obtain honour.

– Proverbs 29:23

These texts are not speaking simply of someone who has been humiliated and brought low. Rather, they are speaking of those in a lowly situation who nevertheless place their trust in YHWH and look to him in their distress. The prophet is asserting that God dwells in such people.

'Contrite' translates dāka' (to 'crush'). We have found it already in the Isaiah scroll. The first text is where YHWH accuses the powerful:

What do you mean by crushing my people, by grinding the face of the poor? says the Lord YHWH of hosts.

– Isaiah 3:15

The other two texts refer to the suffering servant:

He was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed ... It was the will of YHWH to crush him with pain.

– Isaiah 53:5, 10

It is the lowly in spirit and the contrite on heart who are true servants of YHWH, who has a special love for them.

¹⁴He said, "Build up, build up, prepare the way, remove every obstruction from my people's way."

¹⁵For thus says the high and lofty one who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy:

I dwell in the high and holy place, and also with those who are contrite and humble in spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly, and to revive the heart of the contrite.

YHWH's faithful love

¹⁶For I will not continually accuse, nor will I always be angry; for then the spirit would grow faint before me, for I made everything that breathes.

¹⁷Because of their wicked covetousness I was angry; I struck them, I hid and was angry; but they kept turning back to their own ways. ¹⁸I have seen their ways, but I will heal them; I will lead them and repay them with comfort, putting words of praise on the lips of those among them who mourn.

¹⁹Peace, peace, to the far and the near, says YHWH; and I will heal them.

The exilic prophets asserted that YHWH's word could not be thwarted but would accomplish God's design (see 55:11). Since this design was not yet accomplished, they concluded that it must be people's sin that was causing the delay. Their post-exilic disciples have had a lot to say about this sin. Here they assert that sin does not have the final say, and that God's mercy transcends the need to punish. The plea for an end to anger (that is to say to a situation understood as God's punishment for sin) is a constant theme in the psalms:

Rouse yourself! Why do you sleep, O Lord? Awake, do not cast us off forever! Why do you hide your face? Why do you forget our affliction and oppression?

– Psalm 44:23-24

O God, why do you cast us off forever? Why does your anger smoke against the sheep of your pasture?

– Psalm 74:1

How long, YHWH? Will you be angry forever? Will your jealous wrath burn like fire?

– Psalm 79:5

The assurance given in verse sixteen is repeated in Psalm 103:9.

He will not always accuse, nor will he keep his anger forever.

There are a number of parallels to our text in Psalm 85. See also:

For a brief moment I abandoned you, but with great compassion I will gather you. In overflowing wrath for a moment I hid my face from you, but with everlasting love I will have compassion on you, says YHWH, your Redeemer.

– Isaiah 54:7-8

The prophet-preachers are naming covetousness as the basis of injustice (verse 17).

'I will lead them' is based on the verb *nāḥâ*. Others translate 'I will give them respite' (based on the verb *nûaḥ*). One recalls the words of Jesus: 'Happy are those who mourn, for they will be comforted' (Matthew 5:4). Paul quotes verse 19, referring it to the Gentiles and the Jews enjoying peace in the Christian community:

Christ came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near.

– Ephesians 2:17

Proper perspective in religious practice (58:1-14)

Blenkinsopp in his Commentary on Isaiah 56-66 (Anchor Bible Series, 2003) writes (page 147):

The indications are that, beginning in the Neo-Babylonian period, the approved kind of prophecy was becoming increasingly an activity of taking over, editing, commenting on, and updating existing prophecies. Prophecy became, in other words, more scribal and exegetical, more a matter of inspired appropriation and interpretation of existing prophetic words deemed to be still authoritative and valid than a matter of direct prophetic inspiration.

This could be said of much of the material in Isaiah 40-66. Chapter 58 is a particularly good example for it draws on already existing prophecies (and not only from Isaiah) as a way of demonstrating that the inspired teaching of this School comes out of the acknowledged prophetic tradition.

Prophets have been likened to watchmen on the city wall whose task it is to raise the alarm when they see danger coming. The authors of Isaiah 56-66 have already spoken out against the prophets who were failing in their duty (see 56:9-12). They are not about to follow their bad example, so when they are instructed to sound the alarm they do so.

They are echoing the words of Micah, a contemporary of Isaiah:

I am filled with power, with the spirit of YHWH,
and with justice and might,
to declare to Jacob his transgression and to Israel
his sin.

– Micah 3:8

The people are frequenting the temple (seeking YHWH), and keen to know God's will. One could get the impression that they 'did not forsake the justice of their God', but, as will soon be stated, this is precisely where the problem lies. They are fulfilling their religious obligations and taking part in community worship, but have forgotten the central fact stated earlier, that to worship YHWH is to 'maintain justice, do what is right' (56:1). The critique focuses on one particular religious practice: that of fasting.

²⁰But the wicked are like the tossing sea that cannot keep still; its waters toss up mire and mud.

²¹There is no peace, says my God, for the wicked.

¹Shout out, do not hold back! Lift up your voice like a trumpet! Announce to my people their rebellion, to the house of Jacob their sins.

²Yet day after day they seek me and delight to know my ways, as if they were a nation that practiced righteousness and did not forsake the justice of their God; they ask of me righteous judgments, they delight to draw near to God.

³“Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?”

The people are fasting, but with the expectation that this will oblige God to bless them. Their problem is that the blessing is not happening: the social conditions show no sign of improving. In the early years after the return from exile, Haggai sees this as a consequence of their failure to build the temple. What interests us here is his description of the situation:

You have sown much, and harvested little; you eat, but you never have enough; you drink, but you never have your fill; you clothe yourselves, but no one is warm; and you that earn wages earn wages to put them into a bag with holes ... You have looked for much, and, lo, it came to little; and when you brought it home, I blew it away. Why? says YHWH of hosts. Because my house lies in ruins, while all of you hurry off to your own houses. Therefore the heavens above you have withheld the dew, and the earth has withheld its produce. And I have called for a drought on the land and the hills, on the grain, the new wine, the oil, on what the soil produces, on human beings and animals, and on all their labours.

– Haggai 1:6, 9-11

When one came to a heap of twenty measures, there were but ten; when one came to the winevat to draw fifty measures, there were but twenty. I struck you and all the products of your toil with blight and mildew and hail; yet you did not return to me, says YHWH.

– Haggai 2:16-17

Haggai’s contemporary, Zechariah confirms the picture:

Before those days there were no wages for people or for animals, nor was there any safety from the foe for those who went out or came in, and I set them all against one other.

– Zechariah 8:10

Seventy years later, things were no better:

Now there was a great outcry of the people and of their wives against their Jewish kin. For there were those who said, “With our sons and our daughters, we are many; we must get grain, so that we may eat and stay alive.” There were also those who said, “We are having to pledge our fields, our vineyards, and our houses in order to get grain during the famine.” And there were those who said, “We are having to borrow money on our fields and vineyards to pay the king’s tax. Now our flesh is the same as that of our kindred; our children are the same as their children; and yet we are forcing our sons and daughters to be slaves, and some of our daughters have been ravished; we are powerless, and our fields and vineyards now belong to others.”

– Nehemiah 5:1-5

The explanation given here as to why things are so bad is modelled on Zechariah's (see Zechariah 7:1-14).

The criticism is not against fasting. The point is that if people are fasting for religious motives, they need to get into their heads who God is and what is acceptable to YHWH. The prophet-preachers go on to spell this out.

YHWH is the one who freed them from slavery in Egypt. YHWH is about liberating people, removing the yokes that burden them. In the words of Psalm 146:7, 'YHWH sets prisoners free.' 'Sharing bread' is not just a matter of giving some of one's bread to others. It is actually 'breaking bread': eating with them. 'Hiding yourself from your own kin' is pretending the poor are not there: going ahead with one's life as though injustice was not a factor in the social scene. We are responsible for each other.

A disciple of Jesus cannot read this without thinking of the text Jesus chose to outline the essence of his mission (see Luke 4:18-19). It includes the phrase 'Let the oppressed go free'. We watch him offering a gentler 'yoke' (Matthew 11:30), eating with the outcasts and suffering the opposition of the religious leaders of his day who were scandalised by his behaviour (see Matthew 9:11). Nor can we forget the parable in which he itemises the kind of behaviour that ultimately matters and upon which we will be judged (see Matthew 25:34-36).

See the classical text from Exodus 14:19-20. This is as was promised:

YHWH will go before you, and the
God of Israel will be your rear guard.

– Isaiah 52:12

^{3b}Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day, and oppress all your workers. ⁴Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with a wicked fist. Such fasting as you do today will not make your voice heard on high.

⁵Is such the fast that I choose, a day to humble oneself? Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush, and to lie in sackcloth and ashes? Will you call this a fast, a day acceptable to YHWH?

⁶Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke?

⁷Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?

⁸Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; your vindicator shall go before you, the glory of YHWH shall be your rear guard.

⁹Then you shall call, and YHWH will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am. If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil, ¹⁰if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday. ¹¹YHWH will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places, and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail.

¹²Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall build again on foundations laid long ago; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in.

¹³If you refrain from trampling the sabbath, from pursuing your own interests on my holy day; if you call the sabbath a delight and the holy day of YHWH honourable; if you honour it, not going your own ways, serving your own interests, or pursuing your own affairs; ¹⁴then you shall take delight in YHWH, and I will make you ride upon the heights of the earth; I will feed you with the heritage of your ancestor Jacob, for the mouth of YHWH has spoken.

The city is still showing the signs of the devastation of 586. The walls were not rebuilt till the time of Nehemiah (445; see Ezra 5:16).

As noted in commenting on 56:2, observance of the sabbath took on a special importance during the exile period, partly because there was no temple. It became a key identifying mark of a member of Israel. The authors are drawing on Deuteronomy, where YHWH's care for his people, Jacob, is described:

He set him atop the heights of the land, and fed him with produce of the field.

– Deuteronomy 32:13

Just as the depressed situation in Judah has led to a collapse of confidence in fasting (58:3), so it has led to a questioning of the value of prayer. The prophet-preachers again stress the need for conversion of heart, and in particular a commitment to justice. If people are genuinely repentant their prayer will be heard. The darkness they are experiencing is because they have turned their back on YHWH. God has not turned away from them.

Note the variety of words used to describe sin (in italics in the text): ‘iniquity’ (‘āwôn), ‘sin’ (ḥaṭṭa’â), ‘falsity’ (šeḡer), ‘perversity’ (‘āwlâ), ‘worthlessness’ (tōhû), ‘fraud’ (šāw’), ‘mischief’ (‘āmāl), ‘evil’ (‘āwen), ‘violence’ (ḥāmās), ‘evil’ (ra’).

Verse seven and the first line of verse eight are quoted by Paul in Romans 3:15-17 when he is arguing that everyone, whether Jew or Gentile, needs redemption from sin.

As was said earlier: ‘There is no peace for the wicked’ (57:21). The only path that leads to peace, and so to the reception of God’s blessing, is the path pointed out by God himself: the path of the Torah.

¹See, YHWH’s arm is not so short that he cannot save, nor his ear so dull that he cannot hear. ²Rather, your *iniquities* have been barriers between you and your God, and your *sins* have hidden his face from you so that he does not hear.

³For your hands are defiled with blood, and your fingers with *iniquity*; your lips have uttered *what is false*, your tongue mutters *what is perverse*.

⁴No one brings suit justly, no one goes to law honestly; they rely on *worthless and fraudulent* arguments, conceiving *mischief* and begetting *iniquity*.

⁵They hatch adders’ eggs, and weave the spider’s web; whoever eats their eggs dies, and the crushed egg hatches out a viper. ⁶Their webs cannot serve as clothing; they cannot cover themselves with what they make.

Their works are *evil*, and deeds of *violence* are in their hands. ⁷Their feet run to *evil*, and they rush to shed innocent blood; their thoughts are thoughts of *iniquity*, desolation and destruction are in their high-ways. ⁸The way of peace they do not know,

and there is no justice in their paths. Their roads they have made crooked; no one who walks in them knows peace.

Truth stumbles in the public square

⁹Therefore justice is far from us, and righteousness does not reach us.

We wait for light, and lo! there is darkness; and for brightness, but we walk in gloom. ¹⁰We grope like the blind along a wall, groping like those who have no eyes; we stumble at noon as in the twilight, among the vigorous as though we were dead. ¹¹We all growl like bears; like doves we moan mournfully. We wait for justice, but there is none; for salvation, but it is far from us.

¹²For our transgressions before you are many, and our sins testify against us. Our transgressions indeed are with us, and we know our iniquities: ¹³transgressing, and denying YHWH, and turning away from following our God, talking oppression and revolt, conceiving lying words and uttering them from the heart.

¹⁴Justice is turned back, and righteousness stands at a distance; for truth stumbles in the public square, and uprightness cannot enter. ¹⁵Truth is lacking, and whoever turns from evil is despoiled.

¹⁵YHWH saw it, and it displeased him that there was no justice. ¹⁶He saw that there was no one, and was appalled that there was no one to intervene; so his own arm brought him victory, and his righteousness upheld him.

The opening words of this third section of the Isaiah scroll (Isaiah 56:1) were:

Thus says YHWH: Maintain justice, and do what is right, for soon my salvation will come, and my deliverance be revealed.

The lament is that salvation has not come ('it is far from us', 59:11), and the reason is that they have not maintained justice, they have not done what is right.

They were warned that this is how things would be if they failed to observe the covenant:

You shall grope about at noon as blind people grope in darkness, but you shall be unable to find your way.

– Deuteronomy 28:29

We find the same imagery in Zephaniah 1:17 and Lamentations 4:14.

In verse 12 comes the acknowledgment of why this is. This is a confession of sin, a recognition that the situation in which the community finds itself is not because God is failing to uphold his side of the covenant, but rather because the people have persisted in sin, thus blocking the blessings that God has promised them. The reflection concludes with a powerful indictment. The root cause of their dreadful situation is that 'truth stumbles in the public square.'

Having decried the lack of justice and righteousness, and so the delay of salvation, the prophet-preachers now declare that it is only a delay. YHWH's justice and righteousness are not dependent on ours. YHWH will rise up against those who are responsible for injustice, and he will vindicate those who suffer because of it. This applies to those who oppress Judah from outside, but it includes also those who fail to exercise justice within Judah. YHWH's salvation will be experienced only by those who repent. Salvation and judgment are inseparable (see Isaiah 35:14). Evil has to be removed.

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

– Isaiah 1:27-28

The description of YHWH as a warrior is traditional.

YHWH is a warrior; YHWH is his name.

– Exodus 15:3

The following from Isaiah 42:13 is typical:

YHWH goes forth like a soldier, like a warrior he stirs up his fury;
he cries out, he shouts aloud, he shows himself mighty against his foes.

Disciples of Jesus are to take up the fight like a warrior against whatever would draw them away from the path of righteousness:

Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness ... Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

– Ephesians 6:14, 17

Paul exhorts the Christians in Thessalonika

Put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation.

– 1Thessalonians 5:8

¹⁷He put on righteousness like a breastplate, and a helmet of salvation on his head; he put on garments of vengeance for clothing, and wrapped himself in fury as in a mantle.

¹⁸According to their deeds, so will he repay; wrath to his adversaries, requital to his enemies; to the coastlands he will render requital. ¹⁹So those in the west shall fear the name of YHWH, and those in the east, his glory; for he will come like a pent-up stream that the wind of YHWH drives on.

A prophet speaks

²⁰And he will come to Zion as Redeemer, to those in Jacob who turn from transgression, says YHWH.

For ‘redeem’ see Isaiah 41:14, and 56:10. Only those who ‘turn from transgression’ can experience the redemption that God is offering.

YHWH will strike Egypt, striking and healing; they will return to YHWH, and he will listen to their supplications and heal them.

– Isaiah 19:22

I have swept away your transgressions like a cloud, and your sins like mist; return to me, for I have redeemed you.

– Isaiah 44:22

Let the wicked forsake their way, and the unrighteous their thoughts; let them return to YHWH, that he may have mercy on them, to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.

– Isaiah 55:7

²¹And as for me, this is my covenant with them, says YHWH: my spirit that is upon you, and my words that I have put in your mouth, shall not depart out of your mouth, or out of the mouths of your children, or out of the mouths of your children’s children, says YHWH, from now on and forever.

Verse 21 is the prophets’ ‘signature’. Chapters 56 to 59 conclude with the servants of this School staking their claim to have been given the spirit of prophecy. This is the spirit given to Moses. Behind their claim stands the following text from Deuteronomy 18:15-18, in which Moses proclaims:

YHWH your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you shall heed such a prophet. This is what you requested of YHWH your God at Horeb on the day of the assembly when you said: “If I hear the voice of YHWH my God any more, or ever again see this great fire, I will die.” Then YHWH replied to me: “They are right in what they have said. I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their own people; I will put my words in the mouth of the prophet, who shall speak to them everything that I command.

Moses was succeeded by Joshua. In YHWH’s speech to Joshua (Joshua 1:8), the ‘words’ that YHWH promised to put ‘in the mouth of the prophet’ are identified with the law.

In exile, the members of their School carried on the prophetic tradition, proclaiming ‘the word of our God [that] will stand forever’(Isaiah 40:8):

My word that goes out from my mouth shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.

– Isaiah 55:11

Now, after the exile, their disciples, the ‘children’ promised to them (see Isaiah 53:10), are claiming that YHWH has chosen them to carry on this prophetic ministry, and that it will continue on through their ‘children’. They see themselves as the bearer of the flame.

Introduction to Isaiah 60-62

Absent from these chapters are the concerns that have permeated chapters 56-59: the injustices that are dividing the post-exilic community and that have marginalised the ‘servants’ responsible for the final section of the Isaiah scroll (56-66). Chapters 60-62 read as though they belong to the period shortly after the return from exile when the dream of rebuilding a temple even more glorious than that of Solomon was still alive, and before the grab for power caused the divisions in the community about which we have been hearing. The focus of these oracles is not on human justice or injustice, but on the grand design and promise of YHWH. The prophet-preachers are addressing Jerusalem.

There are echoes here of the description of the darkness that covered Egypt while the Israelites were bathed in light:

Moses stretched out his hand toward heaven, and there was dense darkness in all the land of Egypt for three days ... but all the Israelites had light where they lived.

– Exodus 10:22-23

As the glory of YHWH was reflected on the face of Moses (see Exodus 34:29), so Jerusalem is resplendent in the reflected glory of its God. With the return to Jerusalem they were celebrating the renewal of YHWH’s reign in Judah.

YHWH of hosts will reign on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem, and before his elders he will manifest his glory.

– Isaiah 24:23

This is developed in the overture which introduces the whole Isaiah scroll (2:2-3):

In days to come the mountain of the 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. 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 YHWH’s word from Jerusalem.

The promise given during the exile is being fulfilled:

Then the glory of YHWH shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together,

– Isaiah 40:5

¹Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of YHWH has risen upon you. ²Though darkness covers the earth, and thick darkness the peoples.

YHWH arises upon you, and his glory appears over you.

³Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.

⁴Lift up your eyes and look around; they all gather together, they come to you; your sons shall come from far away, and your daughters shall be held on the hip.

⁵Then you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and rejoice, because the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you, the wealth of the nations shall come to you. ⁶A multitude of camels shall cover you, the young camels of Midian and Ephah; all those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of YHWH. ⁷All the flocks of Kedar shall be gathered to you, the rams of Nebaioth shall be at your disposal; they shall be acceptable on my altar, and enhance the splendour of my house.

⁸Who are these that fly like a cloud and like doves to their dove-cotes? ⁹For the coastlands shall wait for me, the ships of Tarshish first, to bring your children from far away, their silver and gold with them, for the name of YHWH your God, and for the Holy One of Israel, because he has glorified you.

The prophet-preachers return to the theme of the repatriation of those previously deported. The promise made by YHWH during the exile is now being fulfilled:

Lift up your eyes all around and see; they all gather, they come to you. As I live, says YHWH, you shall put all of them on like an ornament, and like a bride you shall bind them on ... I will soon raise my signal to the peoples; and they shall bring your sons in their bosom, and your daughters shall be carried on their shoulders.

– Isaiah 49:18, 22

The excitement of return encourages a dream of a glorious future in which Jerusalem is a favoured destination for the rich Arabian trade. Ephah is the leading tribe in Midian (in Arabia east of the Gulf of Aqabah). Sheba is on the eastern shore of the Red Sea in southwest Arabia. The Bedouin tribes of Kedar, including the Nebaioth, lived on the edge of the desert east of Moab, and traded in sheep and goats. One has the impression that this was composed before the long years of suffering when the economy was depressed and rampant injustice had broken the hoped-for cohesion of the community. Matthew 2:11 draws on this text in his midrash on the wise men from the east coming to see the newly-born Messiah, and bringing their gifts of gold and frankincense (Matthew adds ‘myrrh’).

The exilic prophet-preachers had spoken of the coastlands waiting for YHWH to liberate them (see Isaiah 51:5) and they went on to declare:

Nations that do not know you shall run to you, because of YHWH your God, the Holy One of Israel, for he has glorified you.

– Isaiah 55:5

Their post-exilic disciples portray the coastlands as waiting to bring home Judah’s exiles. It is these foreigners who will rebuild the walls of the city, and it will be the turn of their kings to minister to Judah.

As YHWH had said:

For a brief moment I abandoned you,
but with great compassion I will
gather you. In overflowing wrath for a
moment I hid my face from you,
but with everlasting love I will have
compassion on you, says YHWH, your
Redeemer.

– Isaiah 54:7-8

Verse 12 appears to be a comment that has found its way into the text. It reinforces the teaching that YHWH's saving judgment is not automatically experienced by all. Those who obstinately resist God's will cannot receive the offered salvation.

In pre-exilic Judah YHWH was often spoken of as being present in the sanctuary, where the ark symbolised his footstool. The ark seems to have disappeared in the conflagration of 586. This, plus the fact that YHWH's transcendence was highlighted during the exile period, led to a shift in focus. After the exile it is more common to speak of heaven as the place of YHWH's dwelling in heaven, while the sanctuary itself (no longer the ark) is referred to as his footstool – the place from which his Torah goes out to the world.

¹⁰Foreigners shall build up your walls, and their kings shall minister to you; for in my wrath I struck you down, but in my favour I have had mercy on you.

¹¹Your gates shall always be open; day and night they shall not be shut, so that nations shall bring you their wealth, with their kings led in procession.

[¹²For the nation and kingdom that will not serve you shall perish; those nations shall be utterly laid waste.]

¹³The glory of Lebanon shall come to you, the cypress, the plane, and the pine, to beautify the place of my sanctuary; and I will glorify where my feet rest.

¹⁴The descendants of those who oppressed you shall come bending low to you, and all who despised you shall bow down at your feet. they shall call you the City of YHWH, the Zion of the Holy One of Israel.

¹⁵Whereas you have been forsaken and hated, with no one passing through, I will make you majestic forever, a joy from age to age.

¹⁶You shall suck the milk of nations, you shall *be* suckled at the breast of royalty; and you shall know that I, YHWH, am your Saviour and your Redeemer, the Mighty One of Jacob.

¹⁷Instead of bronze I will bring gold, instead of iron I will bring silver; instead of wood, bronze, instead of stones, iron. I will appoint Peace as your overseer and Righteousness as your taskmaster.

¹⁸Violence shall no more be heard in your land, devastation or destruction within your borders; you shall call your walls Salvation, and your gates Praise.

Previously Jerusalem felt ‘forsaken’ (‘azûbâ), ‘like a wife forsaken and grieved in spirit’ (54:6).

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

– Isaiah 49:14

‘Hated’ (šāna’) was a term used for a wife repudiated by her husband. It does not carry the connotations of having strong bad feelings towards someone as does the English ‘hate’, but states that someone has not been chosen. Now all this has changed.

This, too, had been promised:

Kings shall be your foster fathers, and their queens shall suckle you. With their faces to the ground they shall bow down to you, and lick the dust of your feet ... Then all shall know that I am YHWH your Saviour, and your Redeemer, the Mighty One of Jacob.

– Isaiah 49:23,26

Verse 17 continues the dream of a temple more beautiful than Solomon’s.

‘Overseer’ and ‘taskmaster’ are terms used for the oppression suffered by their ancestors in Egypt. The prophet-preachers contrast the way things are going to be in the restored Judah from the way things have been since the destruction of the city and temple in 586.

How different all this sounds from the way things actually turned out. In chapters 56-59 the community is divided, righteousness is hard to find, the poor are suffering the violence of rampant injustice, Judah is in a state of chronic depression, and salvation is urgently prayed for but not experienced. It is in this situation that the author of chapter 60 and the other servants of YHWH clung to their faith, against all the odds.

The neighbouring nations worshipped the sun and the moon as deities. In the renewed city, the source of all enlightenment will be Israel's God alone. We find the same idea expressed elsewhere in the Isaiah scroll:

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

John uses this imagery in his description of the Christian Eucharistic community as the new Jerusalem:

And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb.

– Revelation 21:23 (see 22:5)

The chapter concludes with a restatement of the promise made to Abraham: the promise of land and posterity (see Genesis 12:1-3).

Once again, the dream was followed by terrible disappointment: with exorbitant taxation leading to unpayable debt and the poor having to forfeit their land and to try to eke out a living working for those who had dispossessed them. They needed to hold on to the promises contained in this chapter, to believe that YHWH willed things to be different, and that evil would not win the day.

¹⁹The sun shall no longer be your light by day, nor for brightness shall the moon give light to you by night; for YHWH will be your everlasting light, and your God will be your glory. ²⁰Your sun will no longer go down, your moon will not set; for YHWH will be your everlasting light.

Your days of mourning shall be ended. ²¹Your people shall all be righteous; they shall possess the land forever. They are the shoot that I planted, the work of my hands, so that I might be glorified. ²²The least of them shall become a clan, and the smallest one a mighty nation; I am YHWH; in its time I will accomplish it quickly.

The prophetic spirit

In the following verses (61:1-3), the prophet-preachers are asserting their claim to have been anointed by YHWH to carry on the mission given to Israel (see 42:1-4), and, when the people failed to take it up, the mission was taken up by the School of prophet-preachers of the exile (see 49:1-6). They see themselves as the promised ‘offspring’ (53:10) who are commissioned to keep YHWH’s prophetic word alive. The Isaiah School saw themselves as inheriting the prophetic spirit. They go on to speak of this spirit.

¹The spirit of the Lord YHWH is upon me, because YHWH has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners

When we think of ‘the spirit of the Lord YHWH’ being handed on from master to disciple, we think of Moses and Joshua:

Joshua son of Nun was full of the spirit of wisdom, because Moses had laid his hands on him.

– Deuteronomy 34:9

YHWH said to Moses, “Take Joshua son of Nun, a man in whom is the spirit, and lay your hand upon him.”

– Numbers 27:18

We think, too, of Elijah and Elisha:

The spirit of Elijah rests on Elisha.

–2Kings 2:15

In some texts spirit-possession is associated with a transformed state of consciousness and ecstatic prophecy. In others the focus is on formal authorisation. There are no indications that the servants speaking in our present text are in an ecstatic state. They are very much in control of their words, and they focus on the mission they have been given to speak out against the injustice suffered by ‘the oppressed’ (‘*anāwîm*). This term refers first and foremost to a socioeconomic class. Of course, the promised blessing can be received only if they are open to welcome it, so the idea of looking to YHWH and trusting in YHWH is included in the definition of ‘the oppressed’.

The growth of the state apparatus in both Israel and Judah in the eighth century BC required an increase in revenue. Those who wielded power were able to pass legislation, including taxation, that enabled them to grab land from those who had to go into debt and found that they were unable to keep up repayments. This led to the creation of a class of poor who were deprived of land to provide for their basic needs, and so had to struggle for survival working the land of the rich and powerful. Since they had no bargaining power they were at the mercy of others upon whom they depended. In Judah, this situation was made worse by the devastation of the countryside by the Assyrian forces in 701, and a century later by the Babylonians. We have already spoken of the depressed economic situation experienced in the years after the return from exile (see pages 291 and 310). Things had not improved by the middle of the fifth century (see Nehemiah 5:1-5).

The mission of YHWH's 'servants' was to speak out against the oppression suffered by these disempowered and marginalised poor and to assure them that YHWH would deliver them. In doing so they were carrying on the mission given to Israel: 'to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness' (Isaiah 42:7).

One thinks of the law that required the remission of debts in the jubilee year (see Leviticus 25:10), though there is no evidence that this legislation was carried out. Luke portrays Jesus as choosing this text to describe his own mission:

When Jesus came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: "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, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour." And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

– Luke 4:16-21

Vindication is an essential aspect of salvation. The poor will never be released unless those who oppress them are deprived of the power to do so. 'Comfort' (nāḥam) takes us back to Isaiah 40:1.

There is a play on words here in the Hebrew: instead of 'ashes' ('ēper) there will be a 'garland' (pe'ēr).

Verses 3-4 follow straight on from the end of chapter 60. It appears that those responsible for the final arrangement of the Isaiah scroll have purposely inserted 61:1-3a here at the exact centre of 60-62 as the prophetic 'signature' that authenticates 60-62 as YHWH's prophetic word. The 'they' about whom this is spoken are 'the righteous who will possess the land forever' (60:21). Note that the ruins are said to be 'ancient'.

²to proclaim the year of YHWH's favour,

and the day of vindication of our God; to comfort all who mourn; ³to provide for those who mourn in Zion – to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.

³They will be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of YHWH, to display his glory.

⁴They shall build up the ancient ruins, they shall raise up the former devastations; they shall repair the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations.

YHWH's commitment to his promises

⁵Strangers will serve as shepherds for your flocks, foreigners will till your land and dress your vines; ⁶but you will be called priests of YHWH, you will be named ministers of our God; you shall enjoy the wealth of the nations, and in their riches you shall glory.

⁷Instead of shame they will have a double portion, instead of disgrace they will exult in their lot, they will possess a double portion in their land; everlasting joy will be theirs.

⁸For I YHWH love justice, I hate robbery and wrongdoing; I will faithfully give them their recompense, and I will make an everlasting covenant with them.

⁹Their descendants shall be known among the nations, and their offspring among the peoples; all who see them shall acknowledge that they are a people whom YHWH has blessed.

¹⁰I will greatly rejoice in YHWH, my whole being shall exult in my God; for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation, he has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.

They are not suggesting a democratisation of the temple priesthood. The priests were supported by offerings of the people. They are saying that the restored people of Jerusalem will be in the same kind of relationship with the foreign nations, who will be serving them, while they 'enjoy the wealth of the nations'.

The prophet-preachers assure the oppressed that YHWH hates the injustice which they have been suffering for so long and will see that they are rewarded for their faith in him. His covenant (b'rit) with them – better, his commitment to them – will never end, as was promised:

I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for David.

– Isaiah 55:3

One day the poor who cry out to God will experience the saving power of YHWH of which the prophet-preachers have been assuring them. Then they will be able to make their own the following song of joy.

This will be expressed even more clearly in the following chapter:

You shall be called My Delight Is in Her, and your land Married; for YHWH delights in you, and your land shall be married.

– Isaiah 62:4

They are drawing on the following assurance:

As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.

– Isaiah 55:10-11

Shortly after the return there were those who thought of Zerubbabel, the grandson of Jeconiah, as the ‘shoot’ (šemaḥ) from which the Davidic dynasty would once again sprout (see Zechariah 6:12). Those composing Isaiah 61:11 place their hope in the faithful remnant who have kept their faith in YHWH in spite of the injustice under which they have been suffering. They now affirm their determination to carry out their prophetic commission, assuring Jerusalem that YHWH will see to her vindication.

Foreign nations will see the glory of YHWH revealed in the beauty and prosperity of YHWH’s chosen city. This has been a recurring theme throughout Isaiah 56-66.

Your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; your vindicator shall go before you, the glory of YHWH shall be your rear guard.

– Isaiah 58:8

Those in the west shall fear the name of YHWH, and those in the east, his glory; for he will come like a pent-up stream that the wind of YHWH drives on.

– Isaiah 59:19

Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.

– Isaiah 60:3

When the prince was crowned king he was given a throne name that expressed the hopes placed in him by the people. YHWH intends to establish his kingdom in Judah. He has a royal crown in his hand, ready to crown his bride when the time is right.

¹⁴For as the earth brings forth its shoots, and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up, so the Lord YHWH will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations.

^{62:1}For Zion’s sake I will not keep silent, and for Jerusalem’s sake I will not rest, until her vindication shines out like the dawn, and her salvation like a burning torch. ²The nations shall see your vindication, and all the kings your glory.

²You shall be called by a new name that the mouth of YHWH will give. ³You shall be a crown of beauty in the hand of YHWH, and a royal diadem in the hand of your God.

⁴You shall no more be termed Forsaken, and your land shall no more be termed Desolate; but you shall be called My Delight Is in Her, and your land Married; for YHWH delights in you, and your land shall be married. ⁵For as a young man marries a young woman, so shall your builder marry you, and as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you.

⁶Upon your walls, O Jerusalem, I have posted sentinels; all day and all night they shall never be silent.

Compare:

I will greatly rejoice in YHWH, my whole being shall exult in my God; for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation, he has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.

– Isaiah 61:10

We find the same image in the exilic scroll:

Sing, O barren one who did not bear; burst into song and shout, you who have not been in labour! For the children of the desolate woman will be more than the children of her that is married, says YHWH.

– Isaiah 54:1

Compare also the following:

At that time I will bring you home, at the time when I gather you; for I will make you renowned and praised among all the peoples of the earth, when I restore your fortunes before your eyes, says YHWH.

– Zephaniah 3:20

YHWH will set you high above all nations that he has made, in praise and in fame and in honour; for you to be a people holy to YHWH your God, as he promised.

– Deuteronomy 26:19

As the loincloth clings to one's loins, so I made the whole house of Israel and the whole house of Judah cling to me, says YHWH, in order that they might be for me a people, a name, a praise, and a glory.

– Jeremiah 13:11

Unlike the sentinels castigated in the opening chapter (56:9-12), the members of this School of prophets will be faithful to the commission given them by YHWH.

For Zion's sake I will not keep silent.

– Isaiah 62:1

Those ‘who remind YHWH’ (mazkîrîm, from the verb zākar, ‘to remember’) are the prophets whose duty is likened to the members of the court who keep official records (see Isaiah 36:3, 22). The prophets are to record YHWH’s words. One of their key roles is that of placing the needs of the people before the people’s lord, YHWH. In this, as in other aspects of their prophetic role, the model is Moses (see Exodus 5:22-23; 32:11-14).

One of the ‘curses’ attached to a covenant was that if one party broke the agreement he called down on himself the curse that others would enjoy the fruit of his labours (see Deuteronomy 28:30, 33). YHWH is assuring Jerusalem that what happened to them in the disaster of 586, because they forfeited on their commitment, would not happen again. It is a way of saying that all is forgiven (see Isaiah 40:2).

Verses 10-12 conclude chapters 60-62, tying up a number of themes from the Isaiah scroll.

In the wilderness prepare the way of
YHWH, make straight in the desert a
highway for our God.

– Isaiah 40:3

Build up, build up, prepare the way,
remove every obstruction from my
people’s way.

– Isaiah 57:14

Thus says the Lord YHWH: I will
soon lift up my hand to the nations,
and raise my signal to the peoples;
and they shall bring your sons in their
bosom, and your daughters shall be
carried on their shoulders.

– Isaiah 49:22

⁶You who remind YHWH, take no rest, ⁷and give him no rest until he establishes Jerusalem and makes it renowned throughout the earth.

⁸YHWH has sworn by his right hand and by his mighty arm: I will not again give your grain to be food for your enemies, and foreigners shall not drink the wine for which you have laboured; ⁹but those who garner it shall eat it and praise YHWH, and those who gather it shall drink it in my holy courts.

¹⁰Go through, go through the gates, prepare the way for the people; build up, build up the highway, clear it of stones, lift up an ensign over the peoples.

Note the progress in the following texts. First there is the call to leave Babylon. Then there is the announcement that the time is right to leave. Finally, having completed the journey, they are called to enter Jerusalem:

Go out from Babylon, flee from Chaldea,
declare this with a shout of joy, proclaim it,
send it forth to the end of the earth; say,
“YHWH has redeemed his servant Jacob!”

– Isaiah 48:20

Depart, depart, go out from there! Touch no
unclean thing; go out from the midst of it,
purify yourselves, you who carry the vessels
of YHWH. For you shall not go out in haste,
and you shall not go in flight; for YHWH will
go before you, and the God of Israel will be
your rear guard.

– 52:11-12

Go through, go through the gates.

– Isaiah 62:10

¹¹YHWH has proclaimed to the end of the earth: Say to daughter Zion, “See, your salvation comes; his reward is with him, and his recompense before him.”

They are echoing the words spoken in exile:

Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion,
herald of good tidings; lift up your voice with
strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings,
lift it up, do not fear; say to the cities of Judah,
“Here is your God!” See, the Lord YHWH
comes with might, and his arm rules for him;
his reward is with him, and his recompense
before him.

– Isaiah 40:10

¹²They shall be called, “The Holy People, The Redeemed of YHWH”; and you shall be called, “Sought Out, A City Not Forsaken.”

A highway shall be there, and it shall be called
the Holy Way ... it shall be for God’s people;
the redeemed shall walk there.

– Isaiah 35:8-9

You shall no more be termed Forsaken, and
your land shall no more be termed Desolate;
but you shall be called My Delight Is in Her,
and your land Married; for YHWH delights in
you, and your land shall be married.

– Isaiah 62:4

Introduction to Isaiah 63

Chapters 60-62 form a distinct unit, placed in the centre of the third section of the Isaiah scroll. It presents the ideal state of Israel. Perhaps a better way of expressing this is to say that it presents Jerusalem the way the post-exilic preacher-prophets believed that God designed Jerusalem to be, and the way it would be if the people of Judah would only be open to God's will, and if Jerusalem's enemies would submit to YHWH. One might make a comparison with the opening chapters of Genesis which present the world as a paradise. That is how God intends the world to be, and how it would be were it not for sin. The trouble is that there is sin. The trouble is that not all the inhabitants of Jerusalem are faithful to the covenant, and Jerusalem's enemies are caught up in idolatry, worshipping false gods and not submitting to YHWH.

Chapters 56-59 describe how things really were in the actual Jerusalem in the post-exilic years, and it is to this world that chapters 63-66 return. Chapter 63, verses 1-6, forms a bridge between the picture of the ideal Jerusalem about which we have just been reading and the real Jerusalem described in the final chapters of the scroll. 63:1-6 is a portrait of YHWH as the warrior who, alone, achieves victory over Jerusalem's enemies. The prophets do not want the people of Judah to be pointing the finger of blame at their enemies. Their enemies are not the key problem. It is their own lack of fidelity, and this is something that is within their power to change. YHWH can handle their enemies, as this scene demonstrates. This was the point being made in the final scene before chapters 60-62 were inserted. Chapter 59, verses 15-20 nicely mirrors the verses we are about to read.

One final point before we begin our study of the text. It is about vengeance (*nāqām*). The authors could not imagine liberation without it. How could you liberate oppressed people without defeating those who were oppressing them? How could you reclaim people's rights without removing those who were responsible for trampling over them? Just as the 'redeemer' (*gō'ēl*) had an obligation to pursue and take the life of the person who killed his next of kin, so YHWH, the Redeemer of Israel, was thought of as having to destroy Israel's enemies in order to liberate his people. This theme recurs throughout the Isaiah scroll (see 34:1-17; 35:4; 47:3; 59:17; 61:2). We refer the reader to the Introduction page 16 where we noted the assumption that Israel's enemies were God's enemies. We recall the very different teaching of Jesus: 'You have heard that it was said, 'you shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, 'Love your enemies' (Matthew 5:43).

YHWH, the warrior-king

1^a“Who is this that comes from Edom, from Bozrah in *glistening* garments? Who is this so splendidly robed, marching in his great might?” “It is I, announcing *deliverance*, mighty to save.”

A sentinel (m^cšappēh, see 21:6-9), whose responsibility it is to guard (šōmēr, see 21:11-12; 62:6) the city, challenges a splendidly robed warrior who is approaching the city gate.

The section opened with YHWH’s promise of salvation and deliverance (Isaiah 56:1). The approaching warrior is the victorious warrior-king, YHWH, announcing the fulfilment of the promise. ‘Bozrah’ (from bāšar ‘to gather grapes’) is in Edom. This is the warrior-king already spoken of in chapter 59:

His own arm brought him victory, and his righteousness upheld him. He put on righteousness like a breastplate, and a helmet of salvation on his head; he put on garments of vengeance for clothing, wrapped himself in fury as in a mantle.

He will repay wrath to his adversaries, requital to his enemies. And he will come to Zion as Redeemer.

– Isaiah 59:16-18, 20

He is coming from Edom, for traditionally it was from Edom that YHWH came to the Promised Land:

YHWH came from Sinai, and dawned from Seir upon us; he shone forth from Mount Paran.

– Deuteronomy 33:2

YHWH, when you went out from Seir, when you marched from the region of Edom, the earth trembled.

– Judges 5:4

God came from Teman, the Holy One from Mount Paran.

– Habakkuk 3:3

2^a“Why are your robes red, and your garments like theirs who tread the wine press?”

Once again we hear the voice of the sentinel. Now that the warrior-king is closer to the gate, the sentinel can see that his ‘splendid robes’ are ‘glistening’ – with blood! There is a similarity in sound between Edom (‘*dôm*), ‘red’ (‘*ādôm*), and ‘blood’ (‘*dām*). Furthermore, Edom was noted for its cultivation of vines (see Isaiah 16:8-10. ‘Bozrah’ derives from bāšar ‘to gather grapes’).

The warrior replies. In his response the warrior-king, YHWH, declares that he has achieved victory without the need for human cooperation. He speaks, too, of his 'anger'. Israel's enemies have paid the price of their obstinate oppression of YHWH's chosen people. Israel's enemies cannot stand against the power of Israel's God.

³"I have trodden the wine press alone, and from the peoples no one was with me; I trod them in my anger and trampled them in my wrath; their juice spattered on my garments, and stained all my robes. ⁴For the day of vengeance was in my heart, and the year for my redeeming work had come. ⁵I looked, but there was no helper; I stared, but there was no one to sustain me; so my own arm brought me victory, and my wrath sustained me. ⁶I trampled down peoples in my anger, I crushed them in my wrath, and I poured out their lifeblood on the earth."

Introduction to Isaiah 63:7 – 64:12

This reflection, lament and prayer seems to belong to the period after the return from exile and prior to the rebuilding of the temple in 516. The text begins with a prayer of thanksgiving for the way YHWH has shown his 'steadfast love' by once again becoming a 'saviour' for his people Israel, for once again being their redeemer as in the days of old. Verse seven begins and ends with a reference to YHWH's 'steadfast love' (ḥesed) – the love to which YHWH committed himself when he entered into a covenant with Israel, the love to which YHWH has been faithful. This steadfast love calls for 'praise' (t'hillâ). The Book of Psalms is entitled the t'hillîm, and this passage has a lot in common, both in form and content, with a number of the psalms. The authors of Isaiah 56-66 seem often to have drawn on the texts of the temple singers. Here they assert that YHWH's love and goodness comes from his 'compassion' (raḥ^amîm; compare 49:8; 54:7,8).

⁷I will recount the steadfast love of YHWH, YHWH's deeds, worthy of praise, because of all that YHWH has done for us, the great favours to the house of Israel; the favours he has shown them in his compassion, in the abundance of his steadfast love.

In pity he redeemed them

⁸For he said, "Surely they are my people, children who will not deal falsely"; and he became their saviour.

⁹In all their afflictions he too was and the angel of his presence saved them.

In his love and in his pity he redeemed them; he lifted them up and carried them for all the days of old.

'They are my people' is a covenant formula (see Jeremiah 7:23; Leviticus 26:12). YHWH had every right to expect Israel to be faithful to its side of the commitment. In any case, YHWH is faithful to his, and that is why he 'became their saviour'.

The translation of verse 9 is Blenkinsopp's. The NRSV follows the Greek Version: 'It was no messenger or angel but his presence that saved them': a translation which requires reading the Hebrew *šār* ('afflicted') as *šîr* ('messenger'), and the Hebrew *lô* ('he') as *lo* ('no').

The statement that YHWH felt the pain that his people were experiencing is consistent with the reference to his 'compassion'. The statement that 'the angel of his presence saved them' appears to be an attempt to harmonise two separate traditions, both of which are concerned to preserve the transcendence of God. One speaks of the people being guided and protected by YHWH's 'angel'. The classical text is Exodus 23:20. 'I am going to send an angel in front of you, to guard you on the way and to bring you to the place that I have prepared' (see also Numbers 20:16; Judges 2:1-5). The other speaks of YHWH's 'presence' (Exodus 33:14; Deuteronomy 4:37).

The idea of YHWH 'carrying' his people is beautifully expressed in Isaiah 40:11 and 46:3-4. In the days of old, YHWH carried them across the wilderness to Sinai (Exodus 19:4). The text speaks of God's love ('*ahab*') and 'pity' (*hemlâ*).

YHWH has remained faithful to his covenant, but Israel has not. The expression 'holy spirit' is found in only two texts in the Hebrew scriptures, here (63:10, 11) and in the following plea:

Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your holy spirit from me.

– Psalm 51:11

In the following psalm we find 'spirit' taking its place beside 'presence' as a way of speaking of God's presence and action while preserving God's transcendence:

Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence?

– Psalm 139:7

YHWH is protecting and guiding his people through his 'spirit'. This is especially true of the inspired word that is mediated to the people through the prophetic word.

This picks up the traditional understanding, found throughout the Isaiah scroll, that YHWH was behind the destruction of the city and temple in 586 and the consequent deportation of the people out of the Promised Land. This was a punishment that was aimed at getting them to 'remember' and repent. The word 'remember' (zākar) denotes more than 'calling to mind'. It includes the idea of bringing the past into the present, through liturgical action or other communal prayer. 'Moses, his people' (verse 11) is missing from the Greek Version. It appears to be a marginal note added to assist the reader to realise that the text is referring to the remembering of Moses and YHWH's people.

¹⁰But they rebelled and grieved his holy spirit;

therefore he became their enemy; he himself fought against them. ¹¹Then they remembered the days of old. [of Moses his people].

¹¹Where is the one who brought them up out of the sea with the shepherds of his flock? Where is the one who put within them his holy spirit, ¹²who caused his glorious arm to march at the right hand of Moses, who divided the waters before them to make for himself an everlasting name, ¹³who led them through the depths? Like a horse in the desert, they did not stumble. ¹⁴Like cattle that go down into the valley, the spirit of YHWH gave them rest. Thus you led your people, to make for yourself a glorious name.

¹⁵Look down from heaven and see, from your holy and glorious habitation.

Where are your zeal and your might? The yearning of your heart and your compassion? Do not stand aloof, ¹⁶for you are our father. Were Abraham not to know us and Israel not to acknowledge us, you, YHWH, are our father; our Redeemer from of old is your name.

Verses 11-14 recall the crossing of the Red Sea (see Exodus 14:16, 21) and YHWH's bringing them to their rest at the end of their journey (Exodus 15:17).

Now begins a psalm of lament. We noted earlier that the destruction of the temple and the experience of living outside the Promised Land, led to a shift in the way people spoke about YHWH's presence. While this presence was never limited to the temple, in pre-exilic writings the temple was regularly referred to as the place in which YHWH was present. After the exile, as in this present text, the focus is on heaven (not the sanctuary) as YHWH's 'habitation'.

In the cultures of the ancient Near East, God is commonly referred to as 'Father'. This is rare in the Hebrew scriptures – yet another indication of the avoidance of terms that could compromise God's transcendence. The king is sometimes referred to as God's 'son' – a practice borrowed from Egyptian court protocol, but with the clear statement that this is an adoptive relationship which takes place on the day the king begins his office.

I will be a father to him, and he shall be a son to me. When he commits iniquity, I will punish him with a rod such as mortals use, with blows inflicted by human beings.

– 2Samuel 7:14

I will tell of YHWH's decree: He said to me, "You are my son; today I have begotten you.

– Psalm 2:7

I will make him the firstborn, the highest of the kings of the earth. Forever I will keep my steadfast love for him, my covenant with him will stand firm.

– Psalm 89:27-28

Israel as a people is sometimes referred to as God's 'son' because YHWH is the one who created them as a nation:

You shall say to Pharaoh, 'Thus says YHWH: Israel is my firstborn son.

– Exodus 4:22

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

– Hosea 11:1

With weeping they shall come, and with consolations I will lead them back, I will let them walk by brooks of water, in a straight path where they shall not stumble; for I have become a father to Israel, and Ephraim is my firstborn.

– Jeremiah 31:9

The text here in Isaiah is highlighting the aspect of YHWH's 'yearning of heart' (literally 'the moaning of God's inner organs, *mē'ê*) and 'compassion' (*rah'amîm*). It is this focus on the tender 'feeling' of God that opened the way for the use of 'Father' as a description of God in the writings from the second and first centuries BC.

O Lord, Father and Master of my life, do not abandon me to their designs, and do not let me fall because of them! ...
O Lord, Father and God of my life

– Sirach 23:1,4

He is our Father and he is God forever.

– Tobit 13:4

With tears and a voice hard to silence they all called upon the Almighty Lord and Ruler of all power, their merciful God and Father.

– 3Maccabees 5:7

He calls the last end of the righteous happy, and boasts that God is his father.

– Wisdom 2:16

It is your providence, O Father, that steers its course.

– Wisdom 14:3

We recall the following:

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

– Isaiah 49:15

Lament

¹⁷Why, YHWH, do you make us stray from your ways and harden our heart, so that we do not fear you?

¹⁷Turn back for the sake of your servants, for the sake of the tribes that are your heritage. ¹⁸Why have the reprobates made light of your holy place? Our adversaries have trampled down your sanctuary. ¹⁹We have long been like those whom you do not rule, like those not called by your name.

¹O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence – ²as when fire kindles brushwood and the fire causes water to boil – to make your name known to your adversaries, so that the nations might tremble at your presence! ³When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect, you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence.

The fact is that they did stray, and their hearts were hardened. The assumption is that this must have been God's will. Recall Isaiah ben Amoz's vision:

Go and say to this people: 'Keep listening, but do not comprehend; keep looking, but do not understand.' Make the mind of this people dull, and stop their ears, and shut their eyes, so that they may not look with their eyes, and listen with their ears, and comprehend with their minds, and turn and be healed.

– Isaiah 6:9-10

This lament leads into an urgent plea that God, having 'turned back', would do again what he did on Mount Sinai and what he did at the Red Sea – break through the blockages that we keep putting up, and dispel the resistance that we, on our own, seem unable to overcome.

The prophet us recalling the descent of YHWH on Mount Sinai:

On the morning of the third day there was thunder and lightning, as well as a thick cloud on the mountain, and a blast of a trumpet so loud that all the people who were in the camp trembled ... Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke, because YHWH had descended upon it in fire; the smoke went up like the smoke of a kiln, while the whole mountain shook violently.

– Exodus 19:16-18

There are echoes here, too, of David's prayer:

Is there another nation on earth whose God went to redeem it as a people, and to make a name for himself, doing great and awesome things for them, by driving out before his people nations and their gods?

– 2Samuel 7:23

The psalmist remembers:

God, their Saviour had done great things in Egypt, wondrous works in the land of Ham, and awesome deeds by the Red Sea.

– Psalm 106:21-22

The disciples of Jesus saw him as God's answer to this prayer. Matthew echoes 64:1 when he describes the significance of Jesus' baptism with the words:

When Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were *torn open* to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him.

– Matthew 3:16 (see also Luke 3:21)

In both Matthew and Luke 'torn open' is *anoigō* – the same verb used in the Septuagint to translate 'tear open' (*qāra*) in 64:1.

The prophet-preachers go on to acknowledge how wonderful God is with 'those who wait for him', 'those who gladly do right', 'those who remember you by observing your ways'.

⁴From ages past no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who works for those who wait for him. ⁵You meet those who gladly do right, those who remember you by observing your ways.

The problem is not God's lack of commitment to his steadfast love. The problem is, as always, human sin. The prophet-preachers, speaking for their people, acknowledge this, but plead with God to put an end to his anger, and to stop hiding. When God is hidden from us, all it does is make us sin even more. The theme of God's 'hiding' is found throughout the Isaiah scroll:

But when you were angry, we sinned; when you hid yourself, we transgressed.

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.

– Isaiah 1:15

I will wait for YHWH, who is hiding his face from the house of Jacob, and I will hope in him.

– Isaiah 8:17

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

– Isaiah 54:8

Because of their wicked covetousness I was angry; I struck them, I hid and was angry; but they kept turning back to their own ways.

– Isaiah 57:17

Your iniquities have been barriers between you and your God, and your sins have hidden his face from you so that he does not hear.

– Isaiah 59:2

⁶We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth. We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away. ⁷There is no one who calls on your name, or attempts to take hold of you; for you have hidden your face from us, and have handed us over to our iniquity.

⁸Yet, YHWH, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand. ⁹Do not be exceedingly angry, YHWH, and do not remember iniquity forever. Now consider, we are all your people. ¹⁰Your holy cities have become a wilderness, Zion has become a wilderness, Jerusalem a desolation.

¹¹Our holy and beautiful house, where our ancestors praised you, has been burned by fire, and our most precious possession has become a ruin. ¹²After all this, will you restrain yourself, YHWH? Will you keep silent, and punish us so severely?

Having acknowledged sin, they make the following plea to YHWH, their 'Father'. They plead with their 'Father' (see 63:16), to remember how weak they are and to restore the cities of Judah, and Jerusalem and its temple. They lie in ruins. YHWH is the potter; they are the work of his hands (compare Isaiah 45:9-10). Surely he knows how fragile they are.

After their heartfelt cry, especially for the restoration of the temple, they reiterate their plea that YHWH would break the silence, and stop holding back the abundant love that he has for his people, the love that they spoke of in the opening verse of the prayer (63:7).

YHWH does, indeed, break the silence, to say that his silence was never his choice. The people were deaf to his call, caught up ‘in their own devices’. They are echoing the text from the exile:

Seek YHWH while he may be found, call upon him while he is near;
let the wicked forsake their way, and the unrighteous their thoughts;
let them return to YHWH, that he may have mercy on them,
to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.

– Isaiah 55:6-7

Compare:

They say, “It is no use! We will follow our own plans, and each of us will act according to the stubbornness of our evil will.”

– Jeremiah 18:12

Having been rejected by the synagogue, Paul reached out to the Gentiles. He quotes this text:

Isaiah is so bold as to say, “I have been found by those who did not seek me; I have shown myself to those who did not ask for me.” But of Israel he says, “All day long I have held out my hands to a disobedient and contrary people.”

– Romans 10:20-21

His criticism focuses particularly on their involvement in pagan cult practices. Compare:

You shall be ashamed of the oaks in which you delighted; and you shall blush for the gardens that you have chosen.

– Isaiah 1:29

Compare also:

You burn with lust among the oaks, under every green tree.

– Isaiah 57:5

The reference appears to be to the cult of the Canaanite goddess, Asherah

You shall not plant any tree as a sacred pole (‘āšērâ) beside the altar that you make for YHWH your God.

– Deuteronomy 16:21

¹I was ready to be sought out, but they did not ask for me, I was ready to be found but they did not seek me. I said, “Here I am, here I am,” to a nation that did not invoke my name. ²I held out my hands all day long to a rebellious people, who walk in a way that is not good, following their own devices;

³a people who provoke me to my face continually. sacrificing in gardens and offering incense on bricks;

Pagan cult

⁴who sit inside tombs, and spend the night in secret places;

who eat swine's flesh, with broth of abominable things in their vessels;

⁵who say, "Keep to yourself, do not come near me, for I have been set apart from you."

These are a smoke in my nostrils, a fire that burns all day long.

Throughout the 7th century the prophets constantly criticised the people of Judah for carrying on the ancient cult of the dead in an attempt to communicate with their ancestors. According to Ezekiel even the leaders were involved:

I went in and looked; there, portrayed on the wall all around, were all kinds of creeping things, and loathsome animals, and all the idols of the house of Israel. Before them stood seventy of the elders of the house of Israel, with Jaazaniah son of Shaphan standing among them. Each had his censer in his hand, and the fragrant cloud of incense was ascending. Then he said to me, "Mortal, have you seen what the elders of the house of Israel are doing in the dark, each in his room of images? For they say, 'YHWH does not see us, YHWH has forsaken the land.'"

– Ezekiel 8:10-12

Isaiah ben Amoz spoke out against it:

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, for teaching and for instruction?" Surely, those who speak like this will have no dawn!

– Isaiah 8:19-20

It appears that the practice is still going on in post-exilic Judah (compare 57:5-6).

The ruling against eating the flesh of the pig (see Leviticus 11:7; Deuteronomy 14:8) was because of its use in pagan rituals such as the above.

While YHWH, always faithful to the covenant, continues to appeal to the people to come close (65:1), they are claiming to be 'set apart' ('made holy', *qādaš*) already through their pagan cult. They claim that they can enjoy divine communion without YHWH.

Their behaviour provokes YHWH's 'anger'. He cannot allow them to waste their lives on these superstitions.

Because YHWH 'will take stock of their deeds', not everyone will fall under God's judgment. There are those, like Noah, who will survive the devastating flood of God's anger. These are the 'remnant' that we find throughout the Isaiah scroll:

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

– Isaiah 1:9

The holy seed is its stump.

– Isaiah 6:13

Gleanings will be left in it, as when an olive tree is beaten – two or three berries in the top of the highest bough, four or five on the branches of a fruit tree, says YHWH God of Israel.

– Isaiah 17:6

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.

– Isaiah 30:18

The ones who will survive God's judgment are called here 'servants' ('^abādîm) – they are the ones who have remained faithful to the prophetic word spoken through Isaiah. They are called YHWH's 'chosen' (b^hîrîm). They are the ones who are truly 'my people', because they 'seek YHWH'. YHWH has found a bunch of good grapes in his vineyard (compare Isaiah 5:1-7). They will enjoy YHWH's land from 'Sharon' in the west to 'Achor' in the east.

⁶See, it is written before me: I will not keep silent, but I will repay; I will indeed repay in full measure ⁷their iniquities and their ancestors' iniquities together, says YHWH; because they offer incense on the mountains and revile me on the hills, I will first take stock of their deeds and then requite them in full measure.

⁸Thus says YHWH: When there is still some juice in a bunch of grapes, they say, "Do not destroy it, for there is a blessing in it," so I will do for my servants' sake, and not destroy them all. ⁹I will bring forth descendants from Jacob, and from Judah heirs to inherit my mountains; my chosen shall inherit it, and my servants shall settle there. ¹⁰Sharon shall become a pasture for flocks, and the Valley of Achor a for my people who *seek* me.

¹¹But you who forsake YHWH, who forget my holy mountain, who set a table for Fortune and fill cups of mixed wine for Destiny; ¹²I will destine you to the sword, and all of you shall bow down to the slaughter; because, when I called, you did not answer, when I spoke, you did not listen, but you did what was evil in my sight, and chose what I did not delight in.

¹³Therefore thus says the Lord YHWH: My servants shall eat, but you shall be hungry; my servants shall drink, but you shall be thirsty; my servants shall rejoice, but you shall be put to shame; ¹⁴my servants shall sing for gladness of heart, but you shall cry out for pain of heart, and shall wail for anguish of spirit. ¹⁵You shall leave your name to my chosen to use as a curse, [and the Lord YHWH will put you to death;] but to his servants he will give a different name.

¹⁶Then whoever invokes a blessing in the land shall bless by the God whose name is Amen, and whoever takes an oath in the land shall swear by the God whose name is Amen; because the former troubles are forgotten and are hidden from my sight.

Those, however, who refuse to listen to YHWH's call and are obstinate in doing evil must suffer the consequences that they bring down upon themselves by their choices. 'Fortune' is the Syrian god, 'Gad'. 'Destiny' is the Arabian god, 'M[°]nî'. Rather than trusting in YHWH, the people are seeking good luck through superstitious pagan cult.

The prophets of this post-exilic School go on to dream of a future in which roles will be reversed. They address those who are unfaithful to the covenant, who enjoy power now to ostracise 'the servants' of YHWH. But it will not always be so. YHWH is a God of justice and one day things will certainly be different. One day the ostracised minority of those who are faithful to YHWH will enjoy the blessings promised to them.

The second line in verse fifteen appears to be a marginal comment that has found its way into the text. The idea of YHWH's 'servants' receiving a 'new name' echoes the earlier text which guaranteed the same to the city (see 62:2-4). This, along with the 'new song' (42:10), will happen when YHWH intervenes to bring about his reign (see 42:9; 43:19; 48:6).

'Amen' is an acclamation that affirms truth and trustworthiness (see 2Corinthians 1:17-20).

The prophet continues his vision of what it is that God has in store for his 'servants', the 'chosen ones' who prove faithful to the covenant. Not only will they have a new name which will express how YHWH has blessed them, but they will live in a transformed social and political environment, a renewed city in a transformed world.

The word ;'create'(bāra') clearly indicates that this new situation is something that God, and only God, can and will bring about. The exilic writings frequently speak of God as creator (Isaiah 40:25-26; 40:28; 42:5; 45:7, 12, 18), including the creation of the people, Israel:

Thus says YHWH, he who created you,
O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel:
Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by name, you are
mine.

– Isaiah 43:1

They spoke, too, of former things giving way to new:

See, the former things have come to
pass, and new things I now declare;
before they spring forth, I tell you of
them.

– Isaiah 42:9

Do not remember the former things, or
consider the things of old.

– Isaiah 43:18

From this time forward I make you
hear new things, hidden things that
you have not known.

– Isaiah 48:6

Lift up your eyes to the heavens, and
look at the earth beneath; for the heav-
ens will vanish like smoke, the earth
will wear out like a garment, and those
who live on it will die like gnats; but
my salvation will be forever, and my
deliverance will never be ended.

– Isaiah 51:6

¹⁷For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind. ¹⁸But be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating; for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy, and its people as a delight.

¹⁹I will rejoice in Jerusalem, and delight in my people; no more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it, or the cry of distress. ²⁰No more shall there be in it an infant that lives but a few days, or an old person who does not live out a lifetime; for one who dies at a hundred years will be considered a youth, one who falls short of a hundred will be considered accursed.

All will be renewed

²¹They shall build houses and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit. ²²They shall not build and another inhabit; they shall not plant and another eat; for like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be, and my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their hands. ²³They shall not labour in vain, or bear children for calamity; for they shall be offspring blessed by YHWH – and their descendants as well. ²⁴Before they call I will answer, while they are yet speaking I will hear.

²⁵The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, the lion shall eat straw like the ox; but the serpent – its food shall be dust! They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain, says YHWH.

Chapter 65 began with YHWH's complaint:

I was ready to be sought out, but they did not ask for me, I was ready to be found, but they did not seek me.

I said, "Here I am, here I am," to a nation that did not invoke my name.

It ends (65:24) with an expression of YHWH's delight that he has found 'servants' who ask for him and seek him. They and their descendants are assured of his response and his continued blessing. We recall the earlier statement:

As the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you.

– Isaiah 62:5

Verse 25 appears to be a later addition, harking back to the picture of paradise – creation as it was intended to be by the Creator, and as it would have been were it not for sin.

This echoes another Isaiah passage (though note the change as regards the serpent, see Genesis 3:14):

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. The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The infant shall play over the hole of the cobra, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den. 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 11:6-9

It is clear from the rest of Isaiah 56-66 that the prophet is not against the temple or the cult. It is also clear that those who wield power in the temple are involved in other pagan cult practices. Furthermore, they are responsible for unjust administration that has created an oppressed class that is denied justice. This includes those who are called ‘servants’ of YHWH. The chapter opens with an assertion that the temple is a temple of YHWH, the transcendent Creator of the universe. YHWH is not obliged to those who run the temple as though they were doing him a favour by giving him a place in which to dwell. In the New Testament, Stephen quotes these verses and for much the same reasons (see Acts 7:49-50).

This echoes an earlier assertion:

For thus says the high and lofty one who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy:

I dwell in the high and holy place, and with those who are contrite and humble in spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite.

– Isaiah 57:15

The person who is humble and contrite in spirit is further described here as ‘one who trembles (hārēd) at my word’ (see also verse 5). We find this expression only here and in Ezra 9:4 and 10:3. There, too, it refers to a group that experiences and expressed a profound religiously inspired awe in response to the prophetic word. Because the word for which they have such utter respect is critical of the establishment, they find themselves ostracised, which inevitably excludes them from cultic and civic communion. This in turn places them among the ‘humble and contrite in spirit’ (the oppressed whose spirits are broken). These are the ones who are called elsewhere ‘servants’, and it is to this group, who carry on the ministry of the prophetic School of the exile, that we owe this last section of the Isaiah scroll.

Once again (see 57:3-13; 65:1-7), they criticise the idolatry practised by the temple priests, who carry on with the temple cult, but at the same time are involved in ritual infanticide, various forms of pagan cult, and the worship of idols.

¹Thus says YHWH: Heaven is my throne and the earth is my footstool; what is the house that you would build for me, and what is my resting place? ²All these things my hand has made, and so all these things came to be, says YHWH.

²But this is the one to whom I will look, to the humble and contrite in spirit, who trembles at my word.

³The one who slaughters an ox kills a human being; the one who sacrifices a lamb, breaks a dog’s neck; the one who presents a grain offering, offers swine’s blood; the one who makes a memorial offering of frankincense, blesses an idol.

You who tremble at his word

³These have chosen their own ways, and in their abominations they take delight;

⁴I also will choose to mock them, and bring upon them what they fear; because, when I called, no one answered, when I spoke, they did not listen; but they did what was evil in my sight, and chose what did not please me.

⁵Hear the word of YHWH, you who tremble at his word: Your own people who hate you and reject you for my name's sake have said, "Let YHWH be glorified, so that we may see your joy"; but it is they who shall be put to shame. ⁶Listen, an uproar from the city! A voice from the temple! The voice of YHWH, dealing retribution to his enemies!

Their behaviour is making a mockery of YHWH, but it is they who will be shown up as fools.

The prophet-preachers now address those 'who tremble at YHWH's word'(see 66:2).

They have been claiming, as we have seen (see 65:13-24), that one day it is they who will be vindicated. Their own people mock their claim, demanding a sign. The prophet-preachers continue to encourage them: it is their oppressors who will be put to shame, not they. YHWH is already seeing to it.

Conclusion (66:7-16)

The words of reassurance addressed to those who ‘tremble at YHWH’s word’ is followed by an assurance that Jerusalem will be renewed. This functions as a conclusion to the third section of the Isaiah scroll (Isaiah 56-66), just as Isaiah 54:1-17 functioned as a conclusion to the second section (Isaiah 40-54). Both passages speak of Jerusalem, and both identify the ‘servants’ as the ones who will enjoy the blessings of the renewed city.

As we have already heard, the children have come painlessly and unexpectedly, because YHWH has brought them back from exile:

Lift up your eyes and look around;
they all gather together, they come to
you; your sons shall come from far
away, and your daughters shall be held
on the hip.

– Isaiah 60:4

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

– Isaiah 49:21

In this context it is good to read again Isaiah 54:1-8.

Again and again throughout the third section of Isaiah those in the depressed situation of post-exilic Judah who have found themselves ostracised by the authorities have been summoned to rejoice, for the future is theirs (see Isaiah 60:5, 20; 61:10-11; 65:13-19). Here, too, we see a development of the prophetic words of the exile (see Isaiah 49:13; 51:11; 54:1).

⁷Before she was in labour she gave birth; before her pain came upon her she delivered a son. ⁸Who has heard of such a thing? Who has seen such things? Shall a land be born in one day? Shall a nation be delivered in one moment? Yet as soon as Zion was in labour she delivered her children. ⁹Shall I open the womb and not deliver? says YHWH; shall I, the one who delivers, shut the womb? says your God.

¹⁰Rejoice with Jerusalem, and be glad for her, all you who love her; rejoice with her in joy, all you who mourn over her – ¹¹that you may be suckled and be satisfied from her consoling breast; that you may drink deeply with delight from her glorious bosom.

Judgment

¹²For thus says YHWH: I will extend prosperity to her like a river, and the wealth of the nations like an overflowing stream; your infants will be carried on the hip, and dandled on the knees. ¹³As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you; you shall be comforted in Jerusalem.

¹⁴You shall see, and your heart shall rejoice; your bones shall flourish like the grass; and it shall be known that the hand of YHWH is with his servants, and his indignation is against his enemies.

¹⁵For YHWH will come in fire, and his chariots like the whirlwind, to pay back his anger in fury, and his rebuke in flames of fire. ¹⁶For by fire will YHWH execute judgment, and by his sword, on all flesh; and those slain by YHWH shall be many.

The final words speak of judgment. We need to keep in mind that this material is being composed by the oppressed. They know that liberation can come only if YHWH deals with the oppressors (compare the final words of Isaiah 54).

Appendices (66:17-24)

It seems that in the process of putting the Isaiah scroll together, a number of appendices, intended for clarification, were added.

¹⁷Those who sanctify and purify themselves to go into the gardens, following the one in the centre, eating the flesh of pigs, vermin, and rodents, shall come to an end together, says YHWH.

The first (66:17) is to make it clear that those referred to in 66:15-16 are the devotees of the pagan cults (see 1:29; 57:3-13; 65:1-7).

The second appendix (66:18-21) is another comment on the judgment of 66:15-16.

The proclamation in Jerusalem of the reign of YHWH as King is to be witnessed not only by those of YHWH's 'servants' who are faithful members of Judah, but by all the nations. The post-exilic writings of this School began with the following declaration:

The foreigners who join themselves to YHWH, to minister to him, to love YHWH's name, and to be his servants ... these I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer; their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.

Thus says the Lord YHWH, who gathers the outcasts of Israel, I will gather others to them besides those already gathered.

– Isaiah 56:6-8

They reassert this universalist view here.

Foreign converts to Yahwism will take the message out to the distant lands of the west (Tarshish, Javan and the islands), the south (Put and Lud in Africa), and north (Meshech and Tubal in Anatolia), till the whole world knows the glory of YHWH, the one God of all nations. For the countries mentioned here see Ezekiel 27:10-13 and Genesis 10:2-6, 10.

Some scholars suggest that verse 20 is a later addition to counter the extraordinary claim of verse 21 that foreigners could serve as priests in the temple (see also Isaiah 56:6-8 above).

The third appendix (66:22-23) reaffirms the promises made to YHWH's servants (see 65:9, 15-16), and the centrality of Jerusalem.

18I am coming to gather together nations of every tongue, so that they can come and witness my glory.

19I will set a sign among them and I will send some of them, the survivors, to the nations, to Tarshish, Put, and Lud, Meshech and Tubal, Javan and the coastlands far away that have not heard of my fame or seen my glory; and they shall declare my glory among the nations.

20They shall bring all your kindred from all the nations as an offering to YHWH, on horses, and in chariots, and in litters, and on mules, and on dromedaries, to my holy mountain Jerusalem, says YHWH, just as the Israelites bring a grain offering in a clean vessel to the house of YHWH.

21And I will also take some of them as priests and as Levites, says YHWH.

22For as the new heavens and the new earth, which I will make, shall remain before me, says YHWH; so shall your descendants and your name remain.

23From new moon to new moon, and from sabbath to sabbath, all flesh shall come to worship before me, says YHWH.

²⁴And they shall go out and look at the dead bodies of the people who have rebelled against me; for their worm shall not die, their fire shall not be quenched, and they shall be an abhorrence to all flesh.

The concluding verse 24 reinforces the concluding words of Isaiah 66:15-16. Those who stubbornly oppose the will of YHWH, those who persist in the worship of false gods, those who act unjustly and oppress God's servants, will be judged. The whole world will see this and be appalled at what they see.

This verse may have been influenced by the following from Jeremiah:

The days are surely coming, says YHWH, when this place shall no more be called Topheth, or the valley of the son of Hinnom, but the valley of Slaughter.

– Jeremiah 19:6 (also 7:32)

'This place' is the valley to the south of Jerusalem (Ge-ben-Hinnom; Greek 'gehenna'), the place where ritual infanticide was practised.

There are connections with the prologue introducing the whole of the Isaiah scroll:

Rebels and sinners shall be destroyed together,
and those who forsake YHWH shall be consumed.
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.

– Isaiah 1:28-29

Gehenna became a symbol of divine punishment, and in the apocalyptic writings of the second and first centuries BC, when writers were attempting to explore the consequences of personal resurrection for the good and the wicked, it became a symbol of the eternal punishment that would be meted out to the rebellious. It has this same symbolic reference in the writings of the New Testament:

If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and to go to hell [gehenna], to the unquenchable fire. And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life lame than to have two feet and to be thrown into hell. And if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into hell, where their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched.

– Mark 9:43-48

YHWH's servants are weeping now, ostracised by those in authority in the temple and the city. However, just as YHWH will defeat the foreign powers that oppress them, so he will put down those within the community who are responsible for the injustices suffered by the 'humble and contrite in spirit' (57:15), the 'servants' (66:14) of YHWH. They will see that YHWH cares for them as a mother (66:13), a father (63:16), cares for children.