

Isaiah School after the return from Exile

12. Isaiah 56-59

The returned exiles of the Isaiah School continued to comment on, update, and rearrange the material now found in the Isaiah Scroll 1-39

They continued to comment on, update, and rearrange the material now found in the Isaiah Scroll 40-55

They continue to speak of the breaking in of a new age of salvation (compare Isaiah 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 Isaiah 62:1ff with Isaiah 49:14ff).

They see their servant ministry as a continuing of the ministry of the 'servants' of the exile (see Isaiah 56:6; 63:17; 65:8, 13-15).

The third part of the Isaiah scroll (chapters 56-66) focuses on the internal wrangling 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 the religion of Israel.

What God wants of his people is 'to break unjust fetters, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, to break every yoke'(Isaiah 58:6).

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.

The salvation-hopes of the prophet-preachers of the Exile were not realised. Life in post-exilic Judah was defined by economic hardship (Isaiah 60:17; 62:8-9), insecurity in political life (Isaiah 60:10,18), ruin and devastation (Isaiah 61:4), and the burden of continuing shame (Isaiah 61:7, 62:4). Those who, back in Judah, 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 the 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 Isaiah 60:19-20 and 65:16b-25 speak in more transcendent terms. It would affect the Gentiles (Isaiah 60:3; 60:9b; 60:6, 61:9, 62:2).

Cult worship has a place in the promised state (Isaiah 60:7,13; 62:9), though it is not stressed the way others are stressing it at the time. God would come 'soon' (Isaiah 56:1) and directly intervene (Isaiah 63:1-6; 65:17-25; 66:12-16).

The material in Isaiah 56-66 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'(Isaiah 56:8; see 60:3; 66:18). The Isaiah School is critical of the prevailing narrowness of the leadership of Judah (see, for example, Isaiah 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).

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

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, for 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.

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'.

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 coreligionists to reexamine 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.

Isaiah 56:1

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

- justice (מִשְׁפָּט mishpat) = just judicial decisions
- what is right (שְׂדָקָה şedaqah) = acting in a way that is appropriate to one's right place in society. It is related to the declaration of divine will (including the covenant) and is concerned with establishing, maintaining and restoring this order. Doing what is right results in 'peace'. The focus was very much on 'law' and on the 'social effects' of behaviour, on 'salvation'(yēšû'â).
- The şadiq ['just person'] is a person of hesed (57:1), who trusts YHWH (57:12) and keeps his ways (64:4).
- The disciples of prophet-preachers of the exile were concerned with the prevailing absence of şedaqah (57:1, 12; 58:2; 59:4, 9, 14; 64:5).

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.

Isaiah 56:2-3

Happy 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.

[There is no mention of the sabbath in Isaiah 2-39 or Isaiah 40-55].

Do 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.”

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. 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.

Isaiah 56:4-5

For thus says YHWH:

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

The members of the Isaiah School are fighting to keep alive the universalist view that they inherited. They are also fighting for justice for the oppressed.

Isaiah 56:6-7

And the foreigners who join themselves to YHWH,
to minister to him, to love the name of YHWH,
and to be his servants, [foreigners eligible to take part in the cult]
all who keep the sabbath, and do not profane it,
and hold fast my covenant –
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.

see Mark 12:17

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.

Isaiah 56:8

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

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).

Isaiah 56:9-12 : Against the leaders for their neglect

All you wild animals come to devour!

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

The 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.

“Come,” they say, “let us get wine;
let us fill ourselves with strong drink.

And tomorrow will be like today, great beyond measure.”

Isaiah 57:1-2

The 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.
He enters into peace. They repose in their final resting places.
He was upright in his conduct.

This refers back to Isaiah 52:13 - 53:12. 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.

Isaiah 57:3-13 : Critique of idolatrous cult, even in the temple

Isaiah 57:14-21 : Forgiveness is always possible

Isaiah 57:14-16

“Build up, build up, prepare the way,
remove every obstruction from my people’s way.”
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.
For I will not continually accuse, nor will I always be angry;
for then the spirits would grow faint before me,
for I made everything that breathes.

Isaiah 57:17-21

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

But the wicked are like the tossing sea
that cannot keep still;
its waters toss up mire and mud.
There is no peace, says my God, for the wicked.

Isaiah 58:1-14 : Proper Perspective on Religious Practice

‘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’(Blenkinsopp page 147).

Isaiah 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.

Isaiah 58:1-3

Shout 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.

Yet 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.

“Why do we fast, but you do not see?

Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?”

Isaiah 58:3-5

Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day,
and oppress all your workers.

Look, 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.

Is 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 Yahweh?

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:

Isaiah 58:6-8

Is 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? [Matthew 11:30]

Is 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, [Matthew 25:35 – last judgment]
and not to hide yourself from your own kin?

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

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).

Isaiah 58:9-12

Then you will call, and Yahweh will answer;
you will 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,
if 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.
Yahweh 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.

John 4:14

Isaiah 58:12-14

Your 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.

13 If 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;

14 then 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.

Isaiah 59:1-3

See, YHWH's arm is not so short that he cannot save,
nor his ear so dull that he cannot hear.

Rather, your iniquities [עֲוֹנוֹ] have been barriers
between you and your God,

Your sins [חַטָּאֵי] have hidden his face from you
so that he does not hear.

For your hands are defiled with blood,
and your fingers with iniquity [עֲוֹן].

Your lips have uttered what is untrue [שֶׁקֶר],
your tongue mutters what is perverse [עֲוֹלָה].

Isaiah 59:4, 6

No one brings suit justly,
no one goes to law honestly; they rely on
what is worthless [תְּהוֹהוּ] and fraudulent [שֶׁאוֹר],
conceiving mischief [עֲמָל] and begetting iniquity [אָוֶן].
Their works are works of iniquity [אָוֶן],
and deeds of violence [חֲמָס] are in their hands.
Their feet run to evil [רָע],
and they rush to shed innocent blood.
Their thoughts are thoughts of iniquity [אָוֶן],
desolation and destruction are in their paths.

Isaiah 59:8-9

The 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.
Therefore 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.

Isaiah 59:10-11

We 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.

We 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.

Isaiah 59:12-13

Our transgressions [פְּשָׁעַ] before you are many,
and our sins [חַטָּא] testify against us.

Our transgressions [פְּשָׁעַ] indeed are with us,
and we know our iniquities [אֲוִי]:

transgressing, and denying YHWH,

and turning away from following our God,

talking oppression [עֲשָׂק] and revolt [סִיָּה], conceiving

lying words and uttering them from the heart.

Isaiah 59:14-16

Justice is turned back,
and righteousness stands at a distance;
for truth stumbles in the public square,
and uprightness cannot enter.

Truth is lacking,
and whoever turns from evil is despoiled.

YHWH saw it, and it displeased him
that there was no justice.

He saw and was appalled
that there was no one to intervene;

The prophet-preachers 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.

Isaiah 59:16-17

So 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,
and wrapped himself in fury as in a mantle.

‘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).

Isaiah 59:20-21

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

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 the YHWH, from now on and forever.

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 (Deuteronomy 18:15-18). Moses was succeeded by Joshua (Joshua 1:8). In Exile the Isaiah School inherited this prophetic spirit (Isaiah 55:1), and now their 'children' are carrying on the tradition.



A Trusting Psalm