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What Is the Book of Isaiah?

History of Israel

The book of Isaiah alludes to many of the stories of the Hebrew Bible: Eden (51:3), Noah (54:9), and Abraham and Sarah (29:22; 51:2; 63:16). The “formless void” (Hebrew *tohu wabohu*) of Genesis 1:1 is alluded to in the “line of confusion [*tohu*]” and the “plummet of chaos [*bobu*]” in Isaiah 34:11. The references to Exodus are more numerous, and I note a few examples.

The Lord creates over Mount Zion . . . a cloud by day,
and smoke and a brightly flaming fire by night.
(4:5; see Exod. 13:21–22)

He made water flow from the rock for them;
he split the rock and water gushed forth.
(Isa. 48:21; see 11:15–16; 43:2)

Where is he who put his holy spirit in their midst?
Who made his glorious arm march at Moses’ right hand?
Who split the waters before them? . . .
Who led them through the depths?
(63:11–13)

The division of the land in Joshua 13–21 is alluded to in “He has cast the lot for them, and his hand has divided her for them with the line” (Isa. 34:17; see 34:11).

Little is said of the events of 1–2 Samuel and 1 Kings, although the establishment of the monarchy, the founding of Jerusalem, and the building of the temple are taken for granted as past events. The name David is mentioned a few times (e.g., 7:2, 13; 9:7; 37:35), but there is

no reference to any of the events of his life or to him as a person. The main periods of Israel's history referred to in detail in Isaiah are narrated in 2 Kings 15–20 (2 Chr. 28–32) and in Ezra and Nehemiah.

The following synopsis of these periods of Israel's history is background for the treatment of Isaiah. For reasons of space and simplicity, I do not deal at length with Isaiah's geography either in a technical discussion of its accuracy or as his picture of the world, his visualized map of the universe. His human world comprises the lands stretching from Egypt in the south to Assyria and Babylon in the northeast; this world includes Israel and their immediate neighbors such as Edom, Moab, and Aram. There are references to other distant lands of both Africa and Asia. Beyond the human, Isaiah's geography includes the heavens and the mythic regions of the waters above the heavens and below the earth.

Assyria was a country in Mesopotamia whose power had waxed and waned over the centuries. In 745 B.C.E. Tiglath-pileser III began to establish an empire that would rule the Near East for over a century. From 734 on, he was campaigning in the west and was opposed by a coalition headed by Rezin of Aram, with his capital of Damascus,¹ and Pekah, king of Israel, whose capital was Samaria (Isa. 7–8). Judah, ruled by Ahaz from his capital, Jerusalem, did not join the coalition. The allies threatened to invade Judah, depose Ahaz, and replace him with a new king, the son of Tabeel (Isa. 7:6), who would join the coalition. Tiglath-pileser responded to Ahaz's pleas and payment of tribute. He destroyed Damascus, incorporated Aram into his empire, and invaded Israel. Israel was spared total conquest because Hoshea (732–722) paid tribute. At the time Judah apparently became a loyal Assyrian subject. This conflict in 734–732 is referred to as the Syro-Ephraimite War.

Within a few years Israel rebelled against Assyria, was destroyed by the Assyrian king Sargon in 722 (Isa. 20), and incorporated into the empire. Judah remained a loyal subject. Hezekiah succeeded Ahaz on the Judean throne in 715. In about 704 he joined a coalition against Assyria. Sennacherib, the Assyrian king, invaded Judah in 701, devastated the country, besieged Jerusalem, but did not capture the city (Isa. 36–37). The period of time from approximately 735 to 700 B.C.E. forms the background for much of Isaiah 1–39. Isaiah passes over the next century of Judah's history and, in its references to historical events, jumps from the Assyrian crisis of the late eighth century to the Babylonian conquest, in the early sixth century, of Judah and Jerusalem.

Babylon, both the city and its king, play a central role in Isaiah. It was part of the Assyrian Empire and was frequently an instigator of rebellion, above all with King Merodach-baladan (710–700; Isa. 39). The Chaldeans controlled Babylon in the seventh–sixth centuries; their main monarch was Nebuchadnezzar (605–562). In 605 the Babylonians destroyed the last of the Assyrian Empire. Nebuchadnezzar invaded Judah. In the succeeding years, he took a large number of Judeans into exile at a site near Babylon. He destroyed Jerusalem in 587. This begins the period referred to as the exile, which is usually dated about 600–540. The events of the conquest of the land, the destruction of city and temple, and the exile into Babylon are threatened and anticipated in parts of Isaiah 1–39 and looked back on in 40–66, where their imminent end is predicted. The book of Isaiah, however, says nothing explicit about these events. Chapter 39 closes with a forecast of the Babylonian invasion and exile, and chapter 40 opens with the declaration that the time of exile is over.

About 550 *Cyrus of Persia* appeared on the scene. He conquered Babylon in 539 and incorporated that empire into his own. One of Cyrus's policies was to allow conquered peoples to reestablish themselves in their homeland as long as they would be loyal to him. The Jews were one of these peoples; the books of Ezra and Nehemiah relate one version of their story. Cyrus's career, the return from exile, and the rebuilding of the city and the community form the background for much of Isaiah 40–66.

Historians debate the exile as a historical event. Debated issues include the status and number of exiles (few or many? only the ruling elite or others?), the condition of Judah (both the land and the community: Devastated? Prospering? Somewhere in between?) and the event of "the return" (Who? How many? What effect on Judea?). Regardless of the historical reality of "the exile" and "the return," Isaiah employs them as major patterns and images throughout his book. This is analogous to his transformation of the events of 735–700 into a central pattern. At many points I will speak of the exile and the return as Isaiah speaks of them and depicts them, but I will not thereby be taking a stand on the actual history of an exile or return.

The latter parts of Isaiah 40–66 and earlier parts of the book, such as 24–27, depart from ancient history and look off into a distant future, or into a never-never time, for the final judgment of the wicked, the vindication of the righteous, and the creation of new heavens and new earth. This look into the future is matched by the glance to the distant

past of creation mainly in 40–45. Thus the book of Isaiah scans the history of the world from its creation to its end and re-creation with a particular focus on the period from about 735 to 500.

Outline of Isaiah

There is a large degree of agreement in biblical studies about larger divisions within Isaiah, although there is debate about the significance of the sections for understanding the book. In the following, I divide Isaiah into sections to present, in summary form, its contents and styles and the issues and problems encountered in reading it. As discussed in the introduction, however, I do not employ the usual division into three parts, the three Isaiahs—1–39, 40–55, and 56–66. The discussion is a way to look at this large, complex work, but the divisions are not the only way to break up the book into separate parts.

1. 1:1–12:6

Similar style and content bind these chapters. Whether speeches or narratives, the material is mostly descriptive and presents its scenes with sufficient detail so that we can easily imagine them. The content is largely denunciations of sin and evil, whether that of Israelites or of others, and announcements of the disasters that are rushing upon them. The latter are depicted mainly as military invasion and social anarchy.

For Jerusalem stumbles and Judah falls,
Because their speech and their deeds are against the Lord
to defy his glorious presence.
The look on their faces bears witness against them;
They proclaim their sin like Sodom, they do not hide it.
Woe to them! They have brought evil on themselves.
(3:8–9)

Woe! You who rise early in the morning in pursuit of strong drink,
you who linger in the evening to be inflamed by wine;
Lyre and harp, tambourine and flute and wine comprise your feasts.
But the work of the Lord they do not regard, and the deed
of his hands they do not see!
Therefore my people go into exile without knowledge;
their nobles are dying of hunger, and their multitude is parched
with thirst.

Therefore Sheol has enlarged her throat and opened her mouth
beyond measure;
her [Jerusalem's and/or Sheol's] honored and her multitude go down,
her throng and all who exult in her.
(5:11–14)

The gloomy picture of chapters 1–12 is punctuated by visions of glorious times and concluded by a hymn (12:1–6).

This will be in the latter times:
The mountain of the house of the Lord is established
As tallest of the mountains, as the highest of the hills,
And all the nations flow to it, many peoples come. . . .
They beat their swords into plowshares and their spears
into pruning hooks;
Nation does not lift a sword against nation,
and they no longer learn war.
(2:2–4)

A shoot goes forth from the stump of Jesse,
and a sprout blossoms from its roots.
The spirit of the Lord rests upon it, a spirit of wisdom
and understanding,
A spirit of counsel and strength, a spirit of knowledge
and fear of the Lord. . . .
They do no evil and they do not act corruptly
in all my holy mountain,
For the earth is filled with the knowledge of the Lord
as waters cover the sea.
(11:1–2, 9)

Assyria, with minor roles given to Egypt, Moab, Edom, and others, is the major enemy, first introduced in chapter 7. “The Lord whistles . . . for the bee that is in the land of Assyria” (v. 18). His destruction is announced in chapter 10. “I will punish the arrogant mind of the king of Assyria” (v. 12). There are a group of other named characters, whether individuals, for example, God, Ahaz, Isaiah, Rezin (7:1–8), and Zechariah son of Jeberechiah (8:2); nation or city, for example, Jerusalem-Zion, Israel, and Jacob; or undefined, unnamed characters, such as the child in 9:6 and 10:19 and the shoot in 11:1–5.

There is a basic plot in the chapters that includes a threat of attack,

the attack itself, and finally promised removal of the attacker and the resulting restoration of the people. The elements of the plot do not occur in strict narrative sequence, however, but are found in varying arrangements throughout the chapters. Threat, invasion, and promise, for example, occur in chapters 1 and 10. We will encounter this throughout our reading of the whole book. Isaiah does not present a narrative following a chronological or logical sequence. This is a vision, a poem, that presents, repeats, and continues to repeat themes and images. It is appropriate to refer to Isaiah as a collage or as variations on themes. Therefore, as already stated in the introduction, in my reading of Isaiah I will consistently compare and contrast passages from throughout the book (see pp. 4–5); I will repeat this notice at relevant places. This outline is the main place in my book where I strictly follow the sequential order of Isaiah.

Isaiah compresses the events of 735–700 into a major image and pattern. Because of human evil, the Lord calls for invasion and devastation, yet with a surviving remnant (1:7–9). An overwhelming force sweeps through the land (5:26–30) and, taking on the form of the Assyrian army, destroys all before it, including Damascus and Israel. It rushes into Judah like a swarm of insects (7:18–19), like a flood that reaches to the neck (8:8) and leaves the head as the image of the survivors. The pattern appears in the image of the forest being cut down and the remaining stumps producing new shoots (10:15–11:1). Once the Assyrian is removed, the overwhelming force takes the form of the Babylonian army (chaps. 13–14 and 39).

2. Chapters 13–23

There is a new superscription in 13:1, “An oracle on Babylon that Isaiah son of Amoz saw.” “An oracle on . . .” is repeated in most of the chapters with different nations addressed (e.g., Moab, 15:1; and Tyre, 23:1). The style can be descriptive and graphic as in chapters 13–14 and 20, impressionistic as in 15–16 and 21, and mixed as in 22:1–14 and 23:1–18. The impressionistic poems present the reactions to the devastation and are in an abrupt style. Ar and Kir are Moabite sites.

Alas! In a night Ar is laid waste,
Moab is ruined;
Alas! In a night Kir is laid waste
Moab is ruined. . . .
On every head is baldness,

Every beard is shaved.
In the streets they wear sackcloth;
On its roofs and in its squares,
All are wailing,
Streaming with tears.

(15:1–3)

Chapter 13 expands in striking fashion the depiction of the approach of the overwhelming force (5:26–30) because of the sin of the world (13:9–11). The force now causes worldwide devastation, depicted in terms of natural disaster and military invasion.

Indeed, the stars of the heavens and their constellations
do not gleam with their light;
The sun is dark when it rises and the moon does not shine
with its light.
I punish the world for its evil, and the wicked for their iniquity.
Whoever is found is thrust through, and whoever is captured
falls to the sword.

(13:10–15)

These dark tones reverberate in the following chapters that focus on the devastation and on the evil that led to it. Babylon moves to center stage as the enemy; Assyria is not gone and shares the scene with Babylon. Just as soon as Babylon enters the stage, however, its days of glory and destructive power are known to be already past, for the poet announces its destruction at the start (13:19–14:23). “Fallen, fallen is Babylon! All the images of its gods lie broken on the ground” (21:9). Isaiah never depicts Babylon as a present invading force.

The disaster that befalls the world is concentrated on Babylon and Assyria, and the ripple effects spread to the surrounding peoples, including Israel, Moab, Egypt, and Tyre. They have surviving remnants even if very small and weak (16:14). Because of this concern with other peoples, chapters 13–23 are called The Oracles against the Nations. The title is limiting since the section deals with all humanity and also with Israel, both negatively and positively. Destruction of others both includes Israel (17:1–6; 22:1–25) and means their survival (14:1–3; 19:23–25). The balance and tension between the fates of Israel and others is found throughout the book.

Besides the personified nations and their rulers, other named characters have already appeared in chapters 1–12 or are introduced for

the first time. Ahaz (14:28) and Isaiah (20) are among the former, and Sargon (20), Shebna, and Eliakim (22:15–25) among the latter. The brief tale of the last two presents another Isaianic pattern. A time of power for one nation or person ends in their fall; another rejoices in the fall as they enjoy their time in power. But this is not a permanent state since the pattern repeats itself and the latter falls. Those who think that they are in a safe place can soon be cut down. This applies to all, whether Assyrian, Babylonian, or Israelite.

3. Chapters 24–27

Chapter 24 presents a vivid scene of desolation that is similar to chapter 13 in its cosmic reach, except that the focus is now on the desolation and the human evil accompanying it, not on the invading army that produces it.

The earth dries up, it withers; the world shrivels, it withers;
the heavens shrivel with the earth.
The earth lies polluted beneath its inhabitants, for they have violated
laws, they have broken statutes, they have destroyed
the eternal covenant.
Therefore a curse consumes the earth, and its inhabitants
suffer for their guilt.

(24:4–6)

Destruction befalls the earth and the city of chaos (24:10); the destruction is both natural disaster and social disorder. Chapters 24–27 stand out in their context of 15–23 and 28–33 because of the limited number of specific names and places. The city of chaos has no name and contrasts with Tyre, the arrogant city (23:7). Short chants and songs in the first person (e.g., 24:16, 25:1–5; 26:1–6; 27:2–5) present reactions, although they are more celebration than lamentation.

O Lord, my God, you, I exalt you and I praise your name,
For you have performed wonders, plans of old, entirely reliable.
Indeed, you turned the city into a heap, the fortified city
into a ruin. . . .
For you were a fortress for the poor, a fortress for the needy
in their distress,
A shelter from the storm, shade from the heat.

(25:1–4)

Balancing the section's distinctiveness, chapters 24–27 are, at the same time, a repetition of many of the images and themes of chapters 13–23, now placed in a more inclusive and less specific setting. In a sense, chapters 13 and 24–27 are like statements of principle while 14–23 are the specific examples.

4. Chapters 28–33

These chapters comprise a variety of speeches and declarations of varying length, including a poem on the wisdom of farmers (28:23–29). It is not always easy, if at all possible, to decide who is speaking and to whom or to see what is being described or spoken about. This general and unspecific aspect ties the section to the preceding, chapters 24–27. The speeches are dominated by denunciation of corruption and violence and the announcement of the matching natural, military, and social disasters; in this the section is related to chapters 1–12 and parts of 13–23. The image of the oncoming army is alluded to at points (28:2, 17–19; 29:5–8).

Alas, O proud crown of the drunkards of Ephraim;
The fading bloom of its glorious beauty,
Which is on the head of those bloated with rich food, drunk with wine.
See! the Lord has one strong and powerful like a hailstorm,
a destructive wind,
Like a storm of water, mighty and flooding—
He will hurl them to the earth with force.
You will be trampled underfoot, O proud crown
of the drunkards of Ephraim;
And the fading bloom of its glorious beauty, which is on
the head of those bloated with rich food,
Will be like the first fig before summer that, as soon as someone
sees it, they eat it right from their hand.

(28:1–4)

Like the previous sections, these chapters include glimpses of far better times, mainly in 28:5–6, 16; 29:17–24; 32:1–8, 15–20; and 33:17–24.

In that day the Lord of Hosts will be a beautiful crown
and a glorious wreath for the remnant of his people,

A spirit of justice for those seeking justice, and of strength
for those turning back the battle at the gate.

(28:5-6)

Is it not just a little while before Lebanon becomes farmland,
and farmland is thought of as a forest?
On that day the deaf will hear the words of a book,
while from their deep gloom the blind will see;
The poor will continually rejoice in the Lord, while the needy
of humanity will celebrate in the Holy One of Israel.

(29:17-19)

The grim fates awaiting humans include others than just Israel and Judah, mainly Egypt (30:1-7; 31:1-3) and Assyria (30:29-33; 31:8-9), but they do not play roles as important as they do in chapters 1-12 and as Babylon does in 13-23. Indeed, chapters 28-33 do not have the number of named characters, individual and national, that 1-23 do. God is the sole major named character; David is noted in a reference to the past in 29:1.

5. Chapters 34-35

This is a poem comprising two distinct parts, 34:1-15 and 35:1-10, with 34:16-17 as a transition.² The poem is in the center of the book of Isaiah and is indicative of the prophet's frequent combination and contrast of destruction and restoration, of judgment and salvation. To some extent, this mirrors the division of the book into two large segments. In Isaiah 1-33 the dominant picture and tone are of evil, sin, and the accompanying destruction and punishment; positive and hopeful scenes and proclamations interrupt the gloom at many points. In Isaiah 40-66 the emphasis switches. The dominant picture and tone are of forgiveness, return, and restoration; at the same time, negative scenes and proclamations of sin, desolation, and continued rebellion mar the hope at many points.

Isaiah 34:1-15 depicts a gory slaughter and the resultant eerie, tranquil ruins and their strange inhabitants. The description is reminiscent of chapters 13 and 24. The Lord's rage encompasses the world. It focuses on Edom but does not lose its universal scope. The ruined land of 34:9-15 is "her" land, and she can be Edom, Zion, and the entire earth.³

Yes, the Lord's wrath is against all the nations,
and his fury against all their armies.
He has doomed them, he has given them to the slaughter. . . .
Yes, a day of vengeance for the Lord, a year of retribution
for Zion's case.

Her wadis turn to pitch, and her dust to brimstone.
And her land is burning pitch. . . .
But they possess her, the desert owl and the screech owl. . . .
Demons meet with phantoms, and a hairy beast calls to his friend.
Indeed, there Lilith [a female demon] reposes and finds rest
for herself.

There the owl nests and delivers, for she hatches and broods
in her shade.

(34:2, 8-9, 11, 14-15)

The picture of joy, restoration, and return to Zion in the second part of the poem forms a sharp contrast to the first part. The picture includes many of the positive images of the hopeful passages in chapters 28-33, especially the transformation of nature and the healing of the blind and deaf. The joy of the closing scene is tempered by the following stories of war and sickness in chapters 36-39.

Let wilderness and dry land rejoice; desert, shout and bloom. . . .
They see the glory of the Lord, the splendor of our God. . . .
Then are opened the eyes of the blind, and the ears
of the deaf are opened. . . .
Indeed, waters break forth in the wilderness and streams
in the desert. . . .
There emerges there a highway, yes, a way; it is called
The Holy Way. . . .
The redeemed walk there, the ransomed of the Lord, they return;
They come to Zion with song, with everlasting joy on their heads.
Rejoicing and joy reach out, and grief and sighing flee.

(35:1-2, 5-6, 8-10)

6. Chapters 36-39

The narratives, involving Hezekiah and Isaiah, are almost the same as those in 2 Kings 18:13-20:19. Hezekiah's psalm of thanksgiving in Isaiah 38:10-20 is the most noticeable difference; it is not in 2 Kings. Speech dominates the stories. The narrative portions provide particular

settings for the extended speeches by the Assyrian general, Hezekiah, and Isaiah quoting the Lord. (Most translations print 37:22–29 and 38:10–20 in poetic form.) The four chapters are a transition from the first part of the book to the second and, to some extent, repeat the double vision of destruction and restoration in chapters 34–35.

The first two chapters are a war of words with the final victory going to the words of Isaiah and the Lord.⁴ The enemy is Assyria, whose defeat, but not annihilation, is forecast in 37:29–35 and then narrated in verses 36–38. The army stops at the walls of Jerusalem, the flood reaches only to the neck, and the remnant is left (37:31–32). In the crisis, Hezekiah proves himself to be a king more reliant on the Lord than Ahaz was in chapter 7.

As in chapters 1–12, the stories refer to named individuals, for example, Sennacherib of Assyria, Eliakim, Shebna (see 22:15–25 for the last two), Joah, Tirhakah of Egypt, and Esarhaddon of Assyria; and to places, for example, Lachish, Libnah, and Nineveh. This contrasts with the remainder of the book, which uses traditional names and is much less specific in its references to people and places.

Hezekiah's illness and recovery in chapter 38 are a story of faithfulness and reward, but the reward is limited since Hezekiah is granted only fifteen more years of life. This is analogous to Jerusalem's fate. The city is saved from Sennacherib and then destroyed by Babylon about a century later. The Assyrian army may stop at the walls of Jerusalem, but the invading cosmic army of 5:26–30 and 13:1–16 keeps coming. Chapter 39, the arrival in Jerusalem of messengers from Merodach-baladan of Babylon, marks the transition from Assyria to Babylon as the enemy, even though we already know Babylon's ultimate fate from chapters 13–14 and 21.

7. 40:1–49:13

The section opens with the call to comfort the Lord's people and closes with a short hymn celebrating the comforting. (The fact that the break is made in the middle of a chapter indicates that chapters do not have to be taken as the only way to separate the material into meaningful parts.) With the rest of chapters 40–66, the section shares a style distinct from that in most of chapters 1–39. Large parts of the latter look to the events of the last third of the eighth century as significant for developing patterns and images central to Isaiah's vision. Chapters 1–23 and 36–39 include a large number of specific names of

individuals and places, all of which can be located in that early setting. With the exception of the names and titles for God, Israel, and Zion-Jerusalem, chapters 40–66 use few names of other people and places. The chapters are similar to 24–27 and 34–35.

Most of the speeches in chapters 40–66 are comparatively long and coherent. Many, if not most, of them sound like one side of an ongoing conversation and argument in which we can reconstruct only part of what the other side is saying. The feature is clear in 40:1–49:13 in the use of questions, usually with answers provided (e.g., 40:12–31; 41:2–4; 45:9–13; 48:14–16).

Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand?
Who has marked off the heavens with his hand? . . .
Do you not know? Have you not heard? Has it not been
told to you from the very start?
Have you not understood from the time the earth was founded?
It is he who sits above the earth's horizon, whose inhabitants
look like grasshoppers;
It is he who stretches out the heavens like a curtain,
who pitches them like a tent to sit in.
(40:12, 21–22)

The conversational quality is also evident in the calls to assemble for a debate or a trial (e.g., 41:1; 43:9; 44:7–8; 45:20–21) and in the declarations that others, mainly idols, have no answers or are unable to answer (e.g., 41:28–29; 46:1–7).

Set forth your case! says the Lord. Lay out your arguments!
says the King of Jacob.
Let them lay them out and tell us what will happen.
Tell us about the past, what it was, so that we may consider it. . .
Tell us about the future so that we may know that you are gods.
Do something good or evil so that we may be terrified of you.
But you are less than nothing and your work is less than zero;
any who choose you are an abomination.
(41:21–24)

In part the debate is with other nations and their idols, but this is a backdrop to the main debate with Israel/Jacob. On the one hand, Israel is in despair and doubts the Lord's ability to save them.

Why do you say, O Jacob, and assert, O Israel,
 "My way is hidden from the Lord, and my claim
 for justice passes by my God"?

(40:27)

To counter the despair both God and prophet assert and reassert the divine power obvious in God's creation of the world.

Do you not know? Have you not heard?
 An everlasting God is the Lord, the Creator of the ends of the earth.

(40:28)

On the other hand, Israel resists the message of hope because it involves Cyrus, a foreign king, who is referred to as the Lord's shepherd and even the anointed, the messiah (44:28–45:1; see p. 154). These are terms used elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible mainly for a Davidic king. There is a twofold thrust to the argument. God is able to save and saves in the way God chooses.

Woe to whoever quarrels with the one who fashions him. . . .
 Thus says the Lord, the Holy One of Israel,
 the one who fashions him:
 Will you question me about the future, about my children?
 Will you give me orders about the work of my hands?
 I, I^s made the earth, and I created humanity upon it;
 I, my own hands stretched out the heavens,
 and all their hosts I give orders to;
 I, I aroused him [Cyrus] in righteousness,
 and I straighten out all his ways;
 He, he will rebuild my city, and my exiles he will set free.

(45:9–13)

Cyrus, the one called from the east and from the north, is a human manifestation of the powerful force whose first appearance was at the end of chapter 5. The force took on cosmic and divine proportions in chapter 13. Assyria was the first human manifestation and Babylon the second. Assyria swept through the land but stopped at the walls of Jerusalem. The city symbolizes the remnant. Babylon came next and took people into exile, leaving Jerusalem and the land in ruins. The remnant in chapters 40–66 is the people in exile and those left in the land; deserted Jerusalem symbolizes both groups. The time of exile

ends with the message of comfort for the remnant surviving the onslaughts.

Speak to Jerusalem's heart and proclaim to her
 That she has served her sentence, that her penalty is paid,
 That she has received from the Lord a punishment double
 what her sins deserved.

(40:2)

God is the approaching force: "Look! The Lord God comes with strength, his arm rules for him" (40:10). The human form is Cyrus, who shares some of the characteristics of the army of 5:26–30:

He gives nations to him [Cyrus] and their kings he tramples;
 He treats them like dust with his sword,
 like windblown straw with his bow;
 He pursues them—he passes by safely,
 and his feet do not touch the road.

(41:2–3)

The divine-human force now comes for Israel's benefit. "Cyrus [is] my shepherd, and he will carry out all that I want," including rebuilding Jerusalem and the temple (44:28). The final end for Babylon is announced in chapter 47, and it is mentioned for the last time in 48:20.

Amid the talk of hope and of divine power for creation and redemption, there are strong echoes of previous parts of Isaiah and their message that it is human evil and sin, particularly those of Israel, that have brought disaster upon them. Chapters 40–42 are repeated assertions both of comfort and return for Israel-Jerusalem, indeed for all poor and needy, and of the divine ability to perform this. But this is still the people of old who have eyes and ears but who do not see and hear what matters (42:20); this is the deaf and blind people of Isaiah 6. They have been plundered and are locked in prison, but

Who surrendered Jacob to spoilers and Israel to robbers?
 Is it not the Lord whom we have sinned against?
 They were not willing to walk in his ways,
 and they would not obey his teaching.
 He poured his heated rage upon him, the fury of war.

(42:24–25)

8. 49:14–54:17

Speeches contrasting Zion-Jerusalem's despair with assurances that the Lord can and will restore them open the section. We hear no more of Cyrus or of the arguments that God as Creator has the power and right to call Cyrus.

Zion says, "The Lord has forsaken me, my Lord has forgotten me."
Does a woman forget her infant, showing no compassion
for the child of her womb?
Even if these could forget, I, I will not forget you.

(49:14–15)

The Lord's servant both speaks (49:4–9) and is described (52:13–53:12) in the midst of these proclamations to Zion-Jerusalem. I deal with the servant in more detail in chapter 5 (see pp. 186–200). These two poems on the servant in Isaiah 49 and 52–53 contrast misery and salvation. Citing 49:4–9, which is part of 40:1–49:13, shows that the division into sections is helpful but not a hard-and-fast separation of the material.

In chapter 54 the poet assures a barren and abandoned woman that she will be restored and will have abundant children: "The children of the desolate woman will be more than those of the married woman" (54:1). The woman is both Jerusalem and any abandoned woman in need. The chapter closes with a declaration about the servants of the Lord, not the individuals Zion-Jerusalem and the Lord's servant: "This is the heritage of the Lord's servants and what they have a right to expect from me" (54:17). The remainder of the book concerns these servants, God's people, and focuses on their relation to Israel and, in chapters 60–62, to Jerusalem.

9. Chapters 55–59

Chapter 55 is transitional. It opens with the motif of thirst that is frequent in chapters 40–54: "Ho! All that thirst come to the waters" (v. 1). Choice is central in chapters 56–66: "Seek the Lord while he is to be found; call to him while he is near" (v. 6). Joy closes the chapter: "Indeed, you go out in joy, and in peace you are brought back" (v. 12).

Chapters 56–59 stress the related themes of choice and decision that underlie the division of the people into the righteous, the Lord's

servants, and the wicked, "those who know nothing, all who turn to their own way, their own gain" (56:11). The servants include foreigners and eunuchs, two normally excluded groups (56:2–8). The wicked, the violent, and the unknowing include many in Israel. The deciding factors are the attitude toward God and the matching behavior.

Maintain justice, and do what is right.
(56:1)

All who maintain the Sabbath by not profaning it,
and who hold fast to my covenant—
I bring them to my holy mountain, and I make them happy
in my house of prayer.
(56:6–7)

If you do not trample on the Sabbath by pursuing
your own business on my holy day;
If you call the Sabbath a delight and the Lord's holy day an honor, . . .
Then you may delight in the Lord, and I will make you ride
on the heights of the land.
(58:13–14)

In many ways the depictions of the people here and in chapters 63–66 recall those in 1–12 and 28–33. Isaiah comes full circle, and the remnant of chapters 40–54 finds itself struggling with many of the same problems and issues as the Israel of old. Chapter 59 is a lengthy list of the people's sins and violence. The Lord reacts, for "it is evil in his eyes" (v. 15). God repays enemies with wrath (v. 18), but "he comes to Zion as redeemer, to those in Jacob who turn from rebellion" (v. 20). This is the first mention of Zion-Jerusalem by name since 52:1–9, and it forms a fitting introduction to chapters 60–62.

10. Chapters 60–62

This is a keystone in chapters 55–66. Chapters 60–62 are filled with images of brilliance, joy, and abundance, while the surrounding chapters describe divine wrath and the pleas of the people for mercy and forgiveness. In chapter 60 the poet addresses a woman—each "you" is feminine singular—who is called City of the Lord, Zion of the Holy One of Israel (v. 14). She is bathed in light and her children, her inhabitants, return to her.

Arise! Shine! For your light comes, and the glory of the Lord
rises upon you. . . .
Lift your eyes and look around: they all gather, they come to you,
Your sons come from far away and your daughters,
at their nurses' side.

(vv. 1-4)

In chapter 61 an unidentified person proclaims that she or he has been anointed by the Lord to release all prisoners, particularly Zion's children. Once released, "they rebuild the ancient ruins, the old desolate sites they restore" (v. 4). A person, perhaps the prophet, rejoices in the Lord, "for he has clothed me in garments of salvation, and with a robe of righteousness he has wrapped me" (v. 10).

There will be no rest for anyone until Zion is restored in accord with the image of chapter 60.

For Zion's sake I will not keep silent, and for Jerusalem's sake
I will not rest,
Until her righteousness goes forth as a bright light
and her salvation burns like a torch.

(62:1)

The three chapters close with a renewed call to build the highway for both people and city.

They are called "The Holy People," "The Redeemed of the Lord,"
And you are called "Sought Out," "A City Unforsaken."

(v. 12)

11. Chapters 63-66

Isaiah closes with divine wrath, human pleas for mercy, and a sharp distinction between those with and those against the Lord.

I trample peoples in my anger, and I make them drunk in my wrath,
and I pour their lifeblood on the ground.

(63:6)

Look! The Lord comes in fire, and like a whirlwind his chariots,
To repay with his wrathful anger and to rebuke with flames of fire.

Yes, by fire—by his sword—the Lord judges all flesh;
and many are those slain by the Lord.

(66:15-16)

The people plead for divine help. They describe God's past mercy and their present misery. God was forgiving despite their rebellion, especially during the exodus.

O that you would rend the heavens and descend . . .
O make your name known to your enemies so that
the nations will tremble before you. . . .
Be not exceedingly angry, O Lord, and do not remember sin forever.
(64:1-2, 9)⁶

There is a distinction between those with and those against the Lord; the Lord speaks to the latter.

My chosen inherit [the land], and my servants dwell there. . . .
But you who forsake the Lord, who forget my holy mountain, . . .
I destine you to the sword, and all of you crumble
before the slaughter.
Look! My servants eat but you are hungry.
Look! My servants drink but you are thirsty.

(65:9-13)

The poet stresses positive images and themes in the creation of new heavens and a new earth and with the fertility and joy of Jerusalem.

Be glad for Jerusalem, sing with her, all you who love her!
Rejoice, rejoice with her, all you who have mourned for her. . . .
For I am extending to her peace like a river and,
like a flooding stream, the wealth of nations. . . .
And it is known that the hand of the Lord is with his servants,
and his rage with his enemies.

(66:10-14)

Isaiah closes with a mixed image. All are forever in the Lord's presence and bowed in worship. But they can go forth and "see the bodies of the people who rebel against me, for their worm does not die, and their fire cannot be quenched" (vv. 22-24).

Endnotes to Chapter 1

1. Aram is roughly equivalent to modern-day Syria.
2. See my *Isaiah 34–35: A Nightmare/A Dream* (Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement 281; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999).
3. Translations resolve the ambiguity by using Edom in the translation of v. 9 or by including a footnote indicating that Edom is meant (TNK). NJB employs a neuter pronoun: "its streams will turn into pitch."
4. I take the phrase "war of words" from Danna Fewell's study of the matching narrative in 2 Kings: "Sennacherib's Defeat: Words at War in 2 Kings 18:13–19:37," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 34 (1986): 79–90.
5. In Hebrew the verb form indicates both person and number; "I made" is one word. To use the separate pronoun with the verb emphasizes the subject. I mark this by repeating the pronoun: "I, I" and "he, he." There is a similar emphasis in the repetition, "I, my hands." Translations differ in how they treat these pronouns. They may indicate the pronoun with a phrase such as "I myself" (NJB), "It was I" (TNK, NAB), or "I alone" (REB, GNB); or they may not indicate it at all: "He shall rebuild my city" (v. 13: NRSV, NAB).
6. See pp. 20–21 for discussion of the one-verse difference between the Hebrew and most English translations.