

ISAIAH

The ideal picture of Jerusalem's security in vv. 33–5 seems somewhat to outrun historical fact. It is by no means clear that Jerusalem was as immune from attack as is suggested here. YHWH is pictured as asserting that this is to be done 'for my own sake', a phrase characteristic of the later chapters of Isaiah (e.g. 43:25).

(37:36–8) For the historical issues arising from these verses, see the commentary on 2 Kings. In their context in Isaiah they fulfil the warnings against the proud boastings of the Assyrians in 10:5–19 and elsewhere. One threat against the community has been removed, but it is not yet the time for unthinking rejoicing. Another threat is looming.

(38:1–6) The introductory 'in those days' is very imprecise; we need not suppose that the events described in this chapter occurred later than the Assyrian attack just described. More important is the picture of Hezekiah that is conveyed. Modern ideas of modesty and self-control admired in some parts of the West should be set to one side; Hezekiah can announce his own virtues and can also weep. He asserts his own 'faithfulness', a word from the same root as the warning to Ahaz to 'stand firm' in 7:9, and in the response is recognized as a true son of David. The tradition asserts that Hezekiah reigned for 29 years (2 Kings 18:2), so that the promised addition of 15 years to his life and the promise of freedom from the Assyrian threat invite us to consider this event in close association with the deliverance already described. The relatively rare verb *gānan*, to defend, links v. 6 here with 31:5 (NRSV 'protect') and 37:35. (At this point there are significant differences between Isaiah and 2 Kings, both in what is contained and in the order of the material; Sweeney (1988a: 14–15) and Williamson (1994: 202–8) offer comments on these divergences.)

(38:7–8) Whereas God's own words were reported in the preceding verses, now Isaiah speaks. Once again a sign is given to Hezekiah. In 2 Kings he bargains with God for a more convincing form of the sign; here that form is directly offered. Presumably what is described was regarded as in some way remarkable or even miraculous, but problems of translation (cf. NRSV fn.) make this uncertain. The mention of Ahaz makes us wonder whether some comparison is again intended, but it seems likely that 'the dial of Ahaz' was a recognized feature of the palace–temple complex.

(38:9–20) This 'Psalm of Hezekiah' has no parallel in the 2 Kings account. It is of a form readily recognizable in the Psalms: the Individual Thanksgiving. v. 9 provides the context of recovery from illness, and this may well have been one of those settings for which Psalms of Thanksgiving were provided. vv. 10–15 are in the form of a lament, spelling out with a variety of imagery the ill fate which has befallen the psalmist. Up to that point there are close similarities with Ps 88, but that psalm has no happy ending, whereas here the plea for deliverance in v. 16 is followed by the confident cry of those who have recovered from their troubles. The assumption in v. 18 is that death cuts one off from the opportunity to praise God; Sheol and the Pit are isolated from the presence of God. This is a different picture from that which we found in chs. 25 and 26, but, like the closely related Ps 115:16–18, it makes important theological assertions about the value of this life. But this is more than a purely individual thanksgiving. The restoration can be seen as that of the whole community, able to worship

once more at its holy place after the disaster of exile. The illness of Hezekiah and the death sentence upon him become a type of judgment and exile' (Ackroyd 1987: 165). The 'stringed instruments' of v. 20 are unexpected; such a reference is more usually found in the heading of Psalms (e.g. Ps 4:1) and may serve the same purpose here.

(38:21–2) In the 2 Kings parallel these verses, in substantially identical form, appear earlier, and REB has placed them after Isa 38:6 (cf. also BHS, which makes the same proposal). NRSV resolves the tension by translating the verbs as pluperfects ('had said'). But, awkward though it may be for translators, it is likely that the present order is intentional. Hezekiah had been shown to be faithful even before the sign of healing had taken place. The motif is similar to that expressed in the words of Jesus to Thomas (Jn 20:29). Again, Hezekiah's request for a sign that he 'may go up to the house of the LORD' relates now not to the sundial (as in 2 Kings 20) but to the hope for restoration of its true place of worship to the whole community. The king may legitimately be seen as representative of the larger community.

(39:1–4) A Babylonian theme is now introduced. Merodach-baladan (Marduk-apla-iddina) is known to have been a long-standing threat to Assyria's assured control of Babylon, but he functions here in effect as a symbolic figure. His envoys come 'from a far country, from Babylon', which is surely symbolic of the threat of exile. Similarly the emphasis on their seeing all that is in the storehouses—a quite unnecessary detail in historical terms—is a clear hint of the despoliation of palace and temple by the Babylonians.

(39:5–8) The forewarning of the exile becomes even more explicit. Hezekiah's response has often been taken as a deplorably complacent reaction, washing his hands of any responsibility for such a disaster, but it seems most unlikely that that is how we should read v. 8. It begins with the obedient king acknowledging that all that will happen is within God's providence. Then he asserts his confidence in God's *šālôm* (peace). It is likely that a deliberate contrast is being made here between the *šālôm* of Hezekiah with the repeated assertion in the following chapters (48:22; 57:21) that 'there is no peace for the wicked' (Williamson 1994: 210).

Traditionally, historical-critical studies of Isaiah have made a sharp division at this point, with commentaries often assigned to two different authors working independently. On any showing it seems an unusual place for a division, with ch. 39 ending as it does with a look forward to the threat of the Babylonian exile in the context of the book as a whole which sees hope beyond that threat.

(Chs. 40–55) In critical orthodoxy these chapters are regularly referred to as Deutero-Isaiah, with the underlying assumption that there was a prophet who could be referred to in that way who was active among a group of exiles from Judah in Babylon in the 540s BCE. Attempts have been made to reconstruct some of the obscure details of Babylonian history on the basis of these chapters (see esp. Smith 1944). In German scholarship in particular one comes across references to the 'book of Deutero-Isaiah'; thus Kratz (1991), and, regrettably, Albertz (1990) in an otherwise very perceptive article concerned with the whole book of Isaiah. Kratz is also one of several scholars who have attempted to discern different

redactional levels within these chapters, so that the picture of this material as one coherent block is no longer part of the scholarly consensus. In particular, attention is paid to differences between chs. 40–8 and 49–55 (Merendino 1981); see also the notes in this commentary at the end of ch. 48).

There is certainly no book of Deutero-Isaiah, only some anonymous chapters within the larger collection which we are studying. Attempts to structure history on the basis of poetry are notoriously difficult. But does the substantive point remain? Was there really a poet-prophet among a community of Jews in Babylon in the last years before its overthrow by Cyrus? It may be so. But we should recognize that the evidence is much less secure than is often supposed. In the first place the existence of a substantial community of Jewish exiles, living and presumably worshipping together, is assumed. But it is surely a very unlikely assumption. All that we know of ancient imperial practice in such matters suggests that they would have been dispersed, particularly if they were regarded as posing any kind of threat to good order. The idea of the massive deportation of a community which was able to remain together and in due course to return together owes more to ideology than to the known facts of history.

Secondly, there are very few historical allusions in these chapters which allow us to place them with confidence. In effect they amount to the two specific references to Cyrus (44:28; 45:1), and several less certain but likely allusions to him. Cyrus is a known figure of history whose career reached its climax with the seizure of Babylon in 539 BCE. This only establishes that these chapters (if they are taken as a unity) cannot have been written before that date; they could perfectly well be later. In fact so much attention has been given to the task of showing that these chapters cannot be earlier than the sixth century that little attention has been paid to the possibility that they could be later. (Two scholars who have explored this possibility are Torrey (1928) and Simon (1953); their views have won little support among more recent studies.) This is not the context to explore in detail an alternative reading; we should at least be open to the possibility that, in the context of the whole book of Isaiah, Cyrus is mentioned in the same way as Sennacherib, as a figure from the distant past who was perceived as having played a significant role as God's will for his community took shape. Cyrus is given favourable attention in 2 Chr 36:22–3 and in Ezra 1–6; those references, or the source on which they were based, may provide the origin of the similarly favourable attention to Cyrus here. There is no independent historical evidence to support the view that Cyrus knew anything of YHWH and his worshippers, or that he singled out a Judahite group for favourable treatment. In this context it may also be worth noting that specific references to Babylon in these chapters are very few; indeed, Duhm, who did so much to establish modern study of 'Deutero-Isaiah', gave these chapters a Phoenician rather than a Babylonian setting (Schramm 1995: 22).

We shall look at these chapters as poetry which continues to explore the mystery of God's dealings with his worshippers. There are important links and parallels with what has preceded, but also some characteristic new developments, both in

style and in theological viewpoint, which must not be neglected. While the *historical* arguments for isolating these chapters as a separate unit dating from the 540s may be less strong than has sometimes been supposed, the distinctive features which led to the postulating of a 'Deutero-Isaiah' remain and should not be ignored.

(40:1–2) The end of ch. 39 has supplied the geographical context: Babylon. The next few chapters will retain their concern for Jerusalem, as v. 2 makes clear, but the immediate setting is Jerusalem in exile. By the time that these poems were brought together it had become clear that the punishment brought about by the Babylonians, including the deportation of many of Jerusalem's leading citizens, had not been the end of the story; some at least of their descendants had been able to return. And since that return had taken place during the period of Persian rule, the Persians here as elsewhere in the HB are looked upon with favour. Presumably they were still ruling the community when this material reached its final form.

The message of comfort in these verses and the clear intimation that the time of punishment is over suggests a comparison between this chapter and ch. 6. There the prophet had been summoned to make clear the extent of forthcoming judgement; here the equivalent announcement is that the time of punishment is past. 'Double for all her sins' sounds unjust, and has often been taken as no more than a deliberate exaggeration; Phillips (1982) suggests that the 'doubling' may refer to an innocent generation of those who had undergone exile. In this way the idea of suffering on behalf of others, which plays a prominent part in these chapters, is already introduced. There are uncertainties in these first verses as to who is speaking. What begins as a divine word (v. 1) refers to YHWH in the third person in v. 2, and this uncertainty persists through much of ch. 40, beginning with the unidentified 'voice' of v. 3.

(40:3–5) Each of the first three Gospels saw in this passage a prefiguration of John the Baptist, and applied it accordingly, though at the expense of the parallelism, for they have the voice 'crying in the wilderness' (Mt 3:3; Mk 1:3; Lk 3:3). But there are also important links within Isaiah: the expression *qôl qôrê* (NRSV 'a voice cries out') is virtually identical with 6:4 ('the voices of those who called'). Just as in 6:3 'the whole earth is full of his glory', so here the glory of YHWH is to be revealed so that 'all people shall see it together'. As elsewhere in these chapters there is an ambiguity in the interpretation of such a phrase. It can be construed universalistically, with the God of Israel being known by all the world, and much Christian theology has favoured this understanding. But it can also be interpreted in terms of YHWH as the triumphant warrior, putting all his enemies to rout.

The transformation of the wilderness also played an important part in ch. 35. Underlying these allusions is the tradition of the Exodus and wilderness wandering, when God had led the people to the promised land. The deliverance from Babylon will frequently be pictured in these chapters as a new and greater Exodus.

(40:6–8) A further reference to a voice suggests that the setting of this whole section may be the divine council, and this would provide another link with ch. 6, a link which is still

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further strengthened when we note that the phrase *qôl 'ômēr* ('a voice says') is found in 6:8. Only here and in ch. 6 in the whole Bible are the two expressions, 'a voice cries out' and 'a voice says' juxtaposed (Williamson 1994: 38). In the light of these similarities it is natural to interpret 'the word of our God' (v. 8) as referring to the book of Isaiah itself. 'I said' might seem to contradict what has been said of the anonymity of these chapters, but (though unacknowledged by NRSV) this is an—admittedly very widely followed—emendation of the Hebrew text, which has 'and he said' (Albertz 1990: 247).

The basic theme of these verses is human transitoriness. In the Near East the summer heat quickly withers the grass, and that is the image used here. But there may also be a literary cross-reference. At 28:4 the people were described as a 'fading flower'; here an almost identical expression is used ('the flower fades') to remind the people of their parlous state before the divine rescue had been undertaken. The word translated 'constancy' is Hebrew *hesed*, usually 'steadfast love' or the like. There is much dispute whether that meaning is acceptable here, or whether an emendation should be made (cf. RSV 'beauty').

(40:9–11) Jerusalem is now directly addressed, a warning against giving too specifically 'Babylonian' a setting to this section. As frequently in Isaiah (and, of course, in the Psalms), Jerusalem is the place of the divine self-revelation. Though different imagery is used, this passage is strongly reminiscent of the promise to Zion in 2:2–4 and of the return of the dispersed in 11:11–12. Here it is clear that God is pictured as a conquering king; the image of the king as shepherd of his people is a common one (cf. Ps 23; 78:70–2).

(40:12–17) A series of questions follows, a form characteristic of these chapters, especially the early ones. They are legal in character, based on the questions in a trial as to the truth of a disputed issue. Each set of questions is followed by an answer. For the poet the answers are not really uncertain; the answer is of course that YHWH is responsible for the whole order of creation. This will become a fundamental claim in the chapters that follow, and provide the basis for the often-made claim that these chapters are legitimately described as 'monotheistic'. This is an issue to which we shall need to return.

In vv. 12–14 the answer to all the questions is clearly 'Nobody'. YHWH himself is responsible for the ordering of creation, seen as a supreme example of skilful planning. This concern for creation, though not absent in the earlier chapters of the book, is one of the distinctive features of this section, especially chs. 40–5. Underlying the questions may be the idea of a divine council, with the implication that YHWH, who achieves all by his own power, is superior to the Babylonian gods who needed the advice of others (Whybray 1971); as we have seen, however, the idea of a divine council in attendance upon YHWH is also found in this chapter.

The questions are rhetorical and are not directly answered, but vv. 15–17 balance them by making statements which assert that all the nations are as nothing by comparison with the power of YHWH. Lebanon may be chosen as a specific example because of its fertility and the richness of its forests, but we should also remember the reference to Lebanon when a similar but false claim was put into the mouth of the Assyrians (37:23–5).

(40:18–20) The questions continue, addressed now to a 'you' who will be identified in v. 27 as 'Jacob' and 'Israel'. They take up a theme which was already raised in the Hezekiah narrative (37:18–19) and will recur several times. Whenever these poems were composed, they have as part of their background a community tempted by the worship of human-made representations of the divine. Such 'idols' are fiercely condemned as no more than human workmanship. There is no recognition that they might stand for something greater than themselves. Given the prominence of artistic representation in the Christian tradition it is surprising that these chapters, with their harsh denigration of such representation, have been esteemed as highly as they have. vv. 19–20 have been widely held to be an interpolation (Whybray 1975: 55), but there is no textual evidence to support their omission.

(40:21–4) The address to Jacob/Israel becomes more specific, with a note of accusation. The community should have recognized the creative power and achievement of YHWH. Another motif already touched upon in 37:26 is reapplied: the mysterious and apparently meaningless development of history is in God's control. More specifically, and relevant to the overall thrust of the book, those 'princes' and 'rulers of the earth' who imagine that they control the world's destinies are 'as nothing'. v. 24 sees a reuse of the imagery already employed in v. 7.

(40:25–6) By a kind of *inclusio* the questions here are closely similar to those in v. 18, strongly implying that God's creative power is beyond any comparison. The use of the characteristic Isaianic phrase 'the Holy One' binds this section into the larger structure of the book. We notice also the use of the verb *bārā*, 'created', a word virtually confined in its usage to the divine as creator and rare outside the Priestly account of creation in Gen 1. It is used 19 times in Isa 40–66; its one usage in 1–39 (at 4:5) seems not to offer any special link.

(40:27–31) The series of questions reaches a climax, being now directly addressed to the community. The overarching power of God in no way implies that he has no concern for his own worshippers, and this is shown by the way in which the same form of question, already put to the Assyrian ruler (37:26), is used both at v. 21 and here, v. 28. The complaint of Jacob/Israel that they are neglected or ignored by God is answered with the twofold assertion, of the universal creative power of God, and of his continuing concern for the faint and powerless.

(41:1–7) These verses take up a literary form which we have seen to be characteristic of Isaiah from 1:2 onwards: the trial scene. But whereas in that first poem it was the people of YHWH who were themselves accused, now it is rival gods whose claims are under scrutiny. The trial begins with the summons to universal silence, and the invitation to the witnesses to come forward for judgement (*mišpāt*, a typically Isaianic word, as we have frequently seen). Then with v. 2 the first main speech, setting out YHWH's claim, begins (Schoors 1973). It has been widely supposed that there must be a specific reference to an individual in the 'victor from the east', and opinion has been divided between the traditional interpretation, which from the Targum onwards has understood this of Abraham, and the usual modern scholarly view, which sees here an implicit reference to Cyrus, who will later be mentioned by name (Jones 1971 sets out some of the