

d. Redemption from Babylon: a new exodus (43:14–21)

The exodus theme (3, 9) continues, providing the pattern of the coming acts of the Lord. For the first time since 39:3–6 Babylon is mentioned and (14) its overthrow is promised. But since the overthrow of one conqueror could merely spell the advent of another, leading to more secure bondage, it is explained that the fall of Babylon is an Egypt-exodus event, followed by a homeward journey full of divine provision. The oracle combines two separate poems:

A The promise (14–15)

- a¹ The Lord, the holy Redeemer (14b)
 - b Babylon overthrown (14c–e)
- a² The Lord, holy Creator and King (15)

B The pattern (16–21)

- a¹ A way through the waters; a people destroyed (16–17)
 - b¹ New things promised (18–19b)
 - b² New things described (19c–20b)
- a² Water in the wilderness; a people saved (20c–21)

The two sections offer complementary revelations of divine sovereignty. Part A describes sovereignty over people and affairs, a work of overthrow; part B concerns sovereignty over the natural order, a work of transformation. Hence, by complementarity and contrast, we are presented with a picture of absolute sovereignty. But in each area the Lord works for the welfare of his people (14c, 20c–e).

Babylon overthrown (43:14–15)

The bracketing divine epithets (a¹, a² above) share the thought of holiness and add, respectively, *Redeemer* and *Creator ... King*. It may be that the reference to holiness is intended to keep alive in Israel an awareness that no (mere) national liberation will solve the more basic problem of the standing of sinners before a holy God and, therefore, to encourage a constant forward look to the work of spiritual renewal which has been promised (e.g. 29:15–24). It is equally important, however, to recall that in all his acts God involves his whole nature. He never accommodates himself to a human situation by ceasing to be what he really is. In acts of redemption he is as holy as in acts of wrath.

14 As *Redeemer* (*gō'ēl*; see [35:9](#)) he is the God who takes as his own all the needs of his people; hence *For your sake ...* (cf. the earlier Babylon oracle, [14:1–2](#)). *I will send* is a perfect of determination ('I have determined to send') and the verb is piel, the form used for a superior authoritatively sending an underling. This is the first reference to *Babylon* in chapters [40–55](#). No more background is needed by this reference than chapter [39](#) provides and, as we saw, there is no ground for denying the oracle or the experience recorded there to Isaiah of Jerusalem. *All the Babylonians, in the ships in which they took pride* is (lit.) 'all of them, the Chaldeans in the ships of their joyful/loud shout'. The reference to Chaldeans (NIV mg.) is a poetical elaboration of the idea of Babylon, where they were a well-known component of the population. 'The ships of their shout' could be translated 'their noisy ships', but the word *rinnâ* is not used elsewhere simply of noise but is generally a shout of joy, hence 'the ships they rejoice over'. Babylon is not specifically linked with shipping elsewhere, but note the implications of [Jeremiah 50:38; 51:13, 36](#). It is easy to think of the city delighting in the river and its shipping, and in the event of the city falling, to see those ships laden with refugees.

15 On *holy* see verse [14](#). Since the idea of 'creation' includes ([37:16](#)) maintaining in life, controlling action and experience and directing to the divinely intended goal, the thought of the Lord as Creator would here carry with it the assurance of his continuing purposeful care (see verse [1](#)). *King* adds a dimension of personal relationship and commitment: the king was father of his people (cf. [9:6](#) <[5](#)>).

Overthrow ([43:16–17](#))

The whole drama of the Red Sea in a nutshell:⁹ the opening of a road for Israel ([16](#)) and a pit for Egypt ([17](#)). *Made* and *drew/‘brought’ out* are participles expressing the changeless aspects of God's rule, ever leading his people into life and his foes to death. *Lay* and *rise* are both imperfects, full of vividness and action—'They lie down! Can't get up!'; *extin-*

⁹ How much did Isaiah intend his hearers/readers to explore the meaning of the Red Sea incident? Everything about it is germane to this passage. It was the finalizing of the Lord's victory over Egypt ([Ex. 14:1–4](#)), a demonstration to his people of final salvation ([Ex. 14:13–14, 30–31](#)) and a picture of the Lord's sovereignty alike over human and natural forces. He showed that appearances may be deceptive ([Ex. 14:10–12](#)) and that what looked like divine desertion was in fact the means of the supreme benefit.

guished and *snuffed out* are perfects, indicating the completed outcome.

New things (43:18–20b)

The past can teach (16–17) but it must not bind. The gaze must be ever forward to what God will yet do. It is not that the Lord would go back on or rewrite the exodus revelation but that the Lord's people should live in the present reality of the exodus God.

18 *Former things* refer, as in verse 9, to the exodus acts of God.

19 *Am doing* is ‘am going to do’. The *new thing* is the deliverance from Babylon; a national liberation patterned on the exodus. *Springs* is imperfect (‘will spring/sprout’), like a seed which has germinated and its time has come. *Do you not* expresses affirmation by means of a question, hence ‘You cannot miss it!’ *I am making* is prefixed by the emphatic particle *'ap*, carrying forward the thought of how unmistakable the coming events are: ‘Why, I will set in the desert ...’. On *way* and *streams* see Exodus 13:21–22; 17:6.¹⁰

20 Here we see the acts of God bringing the whole world into harmony, a feature which will be perfected in the Messianic day (11:6–9). Here, the journeying people are met by a transformed world (19cd) into which the animal creation gladly enters with benefit.

Israel preserved (43:20c–21)

The balance of the poem (see the outline above) requires a new sentence beginning at verse 20c, ‘For I will ...’. Exodus 17 is the background for verse 20cd. *My people* is the relationship established by covenant (Ex. 6:7), *my chosen* is the divine will behind it.

21 The potter imagery here (*formed*) means that the people can look with confidence at and through the coming troubles. They are merited tokens of divine wrath (42:25), but they are at the same time the touches and pressures of the craftsman’s hand as he perfects what he planned. Babylon and the return have their part to play in this until the day comes when a perfected people will at last perfectly recount the *praise* of their Lord.

2. Forgiveness of sins (43:22–44:23)

By deftly swinging the spotlight from what the Lord desired in his people (21) to what he found (22) Isaiah introduces the topic of the spiritual state of Israel. Now in four con-

¹⁰ Instead of *n^ehārōt* (‘paths’), a parallelism with ‘way’ worth considering.

nected passages, parallel to those in which he described national bondage and release ([42:18–43:21](#)), he explores this deeper side of their need.

a. Sin exposed ([43:22–24](#))

In a typical pre-exilic manner Isaiah challenges the people at a point where they may well have thought themselves to be above reproach: the cultic expression of religion. If he can convict them here then they may see that they are still in their sin and estranged from God, for the appointed means of forgiveness and reconciliation has not ‘worked’ for them. At first sight, however, the accusation seems rather that of failure to use the cult at all: *You have not called upon me* ([22](#)) ... *not brought me sheep* ([23](#)) ... *not bought any fragrant calamus* ... *or lavished on me the fat of your sacrifices* ([24](#)). This understanding of the verses, however, cannot be correct for there is no known period of Israel’s history to which it would apply. The pre-exilic complaint was of inordinate cultic activity ([1:10–15](#); [Je. 7:21](#); [Am. 4:4–5; 5:21ff.](#); [Mi. 6:6ff.](#)). During the exile temple and priestly ministry were removed by divine action, and the people could hardly be blamed for not doing what was not an option. After the exile the first act of the returned community was to set up the altar ([Ezr. 3:1ff.](#)), and Haggai ([2:10–14](#)) and Malachi ([1:7](#)) evidence its continuing use. It is necessary, therefore, to probe behind the surface meaning as expressed in the translations:

1. The emphasis in verse [22](#) requires a translation like ‘Not me did you call’. This repeats the accusation of [1:10ff.](#), not that prayer and ritual had ceased, but that though abundant both were failing to reach and satisfy God. The emphasis ‘not me’ matches ‘What use to me?’ in [1:11](#). The present passage begins to make sense if we allow this emphasis to continue throughout, even though it is only in the first line that Isaiah’s Hebrew requires it.

2. To discover why their religion failed we turn to the verb *burdened*, the subject of a word-play in verses [23c](#) and [24c](#). It is the hiphil of $\sqrt{\text{ābad}}$, meaning ‘to compel to serve, to make a slave of’. In using it Isaiah may be continuing the exodus background of the preceding oracles and have in mind the same verb in [Exodus 1:13; 6:5](#). The Egyptians forced the people into slavery, but the Lord’s purpose was to bring them to liberty ([Ex. 20:2](#), ‘out of the house of slaves’). It was for this reason he gave them his law, moral and cultic, so that by obedience they might enjoy freedom ([Ps. 119:45](#)). But in [1:10ff.](#) Isaiah complains that the people had used the means of liberty to bring themselves into a new,

cultic bondage, a religion of incessant observance. By making ritual the exclusive content of religion they had actually excluded themselves from the benefits the sacrifices were intended to bring. Ritual divorced from moral and spiritual commitment neither satisfies God nor blesses his people. Indeed to the contrary, for they were acting as if their ritual was a technique for manipulating blessing, putting the Lord at their beck and call. Thus they made a slave of him!

3. Another verb, *√yāgā'*, runs through the passage and enforces the truth as it is beginning to emerge. 'You have wearied of me' ([22b](#))¹¹ is the qal of this verb and 'wearyed you', 'wearied me' ([23d](#), [24d](#)) the hiphil. The Lord called his people into his fellowship and this involved hearing and obeying his word ([Ex. 19:5](#)), but they chose another way ([30:9–11](#)). To walk with the Holy One was too costly, and they settled for the softer and more exciting option of religious fervour. But in the intention of God the sacrificial system was meant to meet the needs of people as they discovered their inability to live up to the law and their constant need for forgiveness and restoration. Thus the sacrifices were designed for relief, delight and home-coming to God. By opting for a mere ritual and evacuating the sacrifices of their power they remained in their sin and as such were a constant weariness to the Holy One. Thus Isaiah's message in these verses is the same as in [1:10ff](#). There was much religious fervour but no religious reality. At the point where they might have expected to please God they wearyed him ([24; 1:14](#)); where they most zealously assumed themselves to be right they were proving only that they were still in their sin.

The verses consist of five couplets designed to show how human works contradict the desire of God:

A¹ A disinclination for the Lord ([22](#))

B¹ Cultic failure, sacrifices not honouring the Lord ([23ab](#))

C Divine intent: not to enslave ([23cd](#))

B² Cultic failure, sacrifices not satisfying the Lord ([24ab](#))

A² A burden upon the Lord ([24cd](#))

[22](#) *Called upon* can include the cultic expression of religion ([Gn. 13:4](#)) but it necessarily stresses the personal side of religious activity, prayer and communion with God. *Me*

¹¹ It is not clear what text the NIV is following here. For the MT see note on verse [22](#).

occupies the emphatic place in the sentence. Their religious life was so astray from the divine intention that it was ‘not me’ they called upon. Cf. the strictures of the Lord Jesus ([Mt. 15:9](#)) on a tradition-based religion which has deserted the revealed word. Verse [22b](#) is (lit.) ‘Why [‘*aþ*] you have wearied of me?’ √ *yāgā*’ with following *b^e* means ‘to work for (so as to gain)’ ([62:8](#)); ‘to be involved, taken up with’ ([47:12](#)), ‘to be weary of’ ([57:10](#)).

23 Following the clue of verse [22](#), the pronouns *me* ... *me*, though not in an emphatic position, must be emphasized to secure the right meaning, as if to say ‘Burnt offerings you brought—but not to me’. *Honoured me* expresses the heart of the accusation here (see the outline above and on verse [24b](#)). In [Malachi 1:6–7](#) the Lord was dishonoured by a religion on the cheap; here the assumption that the sacrifices were mechanical in their effect dishonours the moral holiness of the Lord by subjecting him to a form of magic. Note how the central couplet ([23cd](#)) uses the verbs central to the argument: *burdened* (cf. verse [24d](#)) and *wearied* (cf. verse [22b](#)). On *not burdened*/‘made a slave of’ and *wearied* see the introductory note above. Commentators find here the same controversy as in [1:10ff](#). Was the prophet opposed to sacrifice as such or only to the abuse of it? (See North for the former opinion.) The latter option has been argued above in the introductory note. See also [44:28](#) where Isaiah delights in the prospect of the restored temple, which would ill-accord with rooted objection to sacrifice. Frankincense was a component in the tabernacle *incense* ([Ex. 30:34–38](#)) and was used with the cereal offering ([Lv. 2:2](#)).

24 *Fragrant calamus* was used in the anointing oil ([Ex. 30:23](#); [Je. 6:20](#)). *Lavished on me* is (lit.) ‘saturated me’, i.e. sated or satisfied me. The *fat* was the Lord’s portion ([Lv. 3:16–17](#)). The truth (here anthropomorphically expressed) of ‘sating’ the Lord lies at the centre of all religion. The point is not that it should please, help etc. people but that it should please and satisfy God. ‘True religion must be conformed to the will of God as its unerring standard’.¹² On *burdened*/‘made a slave of’ see verse [23c](#). They thought that by the technique of sacrifice God could be made to do their bidding. *Sins* is *hatṭā’ṭ* and *offences* is *‘āwōn* (see [6:7](#)).

b. The past forgotten, the future blessed (43:25–44:5)

Isaiah leaps straight from the God burdened by his people’s sins ([24](#)) to the God who

¹² J. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1559), in the Library of Christian classics, vols. XX and XXI, ed. J. T. McNeill, tr. Ford Lewis Battles (Westminster Press, 1960), I. iv. 3.

blots them out. No connecting word in human vocabulary can bring these two realities together. Only God knows how holiness and pardon co-exist in the divine nature. The poem offers no explanation, only a statement that wrath ([28](#)) is replaced by blessing ([44:3](#)). The six four-line stanzas open by proposing a court room confrontation ([43:25–26](#)) to see whether the Lord's intention to forgive ([25](#)) accords with evidence ([26](#)). But though the counter-evidence ([27–28](#)) is overwhelming, a divine logic is at work ([44:1](#), *But now*) whereby a new situation of blessing is forecast ([1–5](#)).

A¹ Response invited: does the evidence justify forgiveness? ([25–26](#))

B¹ The sins of the fathers ([27–28](#))

C The word of the Lord ([44:1–3b](#))

c¹ The unchanged status of Israel before the Lord ([1–2b](#))

c² Fear removed, provision pictured ([2c–3b](#))

B² The blessing of the descendants ([3c–4](#))

A¹ Response predicted ([5](#))

The absence of a central D section in this poem is keenly felt. Surely there is need of an explanation of the Lord's turn from wrath to forgiveness. Plainly, there is no human argument in its favour ([26](#)), but yet the answer is not given, only the assurance that a full salvation is coming which deals with the past ([25](#)) and provides new life for the future ([44:3c–4](#)). This salvation arises from within the divine nature ([25](#), *for my own sake*), implements God's choice ([44:1–2](#)), and accords with his covenant undertaking to be 'God to you and to your seed after you' ([3–4](#); *Gn. 17:7*).

Can forgiveness be justified? ([43:25–26](#))

The opening proclamation of pardon ([25](#)) is followed by an invitation to produce such evidence as at law would secure acquittal ([26](#)).

[25](#) In *I, even I* the repetition is for emotional intensity (*cf. 43:11*) and is typical of Isaiah. *He who blots* is a participle which makes forgiveness of sins a divine attribute. *Blots out* is used in the sense of 'wipes clean' in [2 Kings 21:13](#) and of sin in [Psalm 51:1](#) [*<3>*](#). Sin blots the character, and the Lord sees the mark it leaves. *Transgressions/rebellions* is wilful disobedience (*cf. 24:20*). *For my own sake* means for reasons that find their explanation within my own nature. God *remembers their sins no more*—what he has forgotten can never again rise up to challenge or condemn (*cf. Je. 31:34; Mi. 7:18–19*). Even were

Satan himself to rake up the past before God, he would be foiled by God's inability to remember. *Sins* (*hattāt*) are the actual slips (6:7), the sin of the deed as 'rebellion' is the sin of the will.

26 The invitation to the sinner to make out a case points to the justice which God requires in the matter of forgiveness. Before the word of pardon can be implemented sinners must face their hopelessness before the law. *Review the past* is (lit.) 'remind me'; the NIV is a good interpretative translation. 'At law' should be added after *let us argue*, as the verb *śāpat* ('to judge') requires it here.

The sins of the father (43:27–28)

Possibly we may imagine a silence in court following verse 26 while the judge waits for the accused to make his defence. But in default of such the prosecution case continues and makes the possibility of verse 25 seem ever more remote.

27 *Father* could be collective, making a parallel with *spokesmen*, but the singular referring to the founding father is better. The reference could be to Adam, the founder par excellence; Abraham, the ultimate ancestor; or Jacob, the immediate father of the nation. *Your spokesmen* is from $\sqrt{līṣ}$, possibly meaning 'to talk big' (cf. 'scorner' in 29:14, 20, 22; 29:20). On the hiphil, used here, cf. 2 Chronicles 32:31 where it is translated 'envoys'. Thus from first founder through all subsequent leaders and up to the contemporary generation the story is the same (*sinned* and *rebelled* are the verbs corresponding to the nouns in verse 25).

28 Regarding the verbs *disgrace* and *consign* it is impossible to be sure what tense to use.¹³ Past, present and future can all be exemplified. A past tense would look back to earlier acts of divine judgment or (incipient past) to the time when the process began or (continuous past) to the process of divine opposition itself. A future, as the NIV has chosen, is certainly the most vivid in context. Since no case has been made out for forgive-

¹³ The verbal form is imperfect with simple waw. Some (e.g. BHS, Whybray) alter to waw consecutive, with a plainly past meaning. Driver (66n) notes that in the piel waw consecutive with first person singular sometimes takes a short 'a' (e.g. Jdg. 6:9; 20:6). At 84a he notes that imperfect with simple waw can express a single past act (e.g. 10:13; 48:3), but some such examples are better considered to be frequentatives or incipients (e.g. 5:12). Also the imperfect or jussive with simple waw expresses consequence, hence 'and so I had to' (Driver, 51–53). See also McFall, p. 19.

ness, and the record to date is of unrelieved sin and rebellion, there is only one judgment that can be given. *The dignitaries of your temple*/‘the princes of holiness’ could, since ‘holiness’ is also used meaning ‘sanctuary’, mean ‘the temple princes’ (*cf.* 1 Ch. 24:5). The plainest meaning is simply ‘the holy princes’, *i.e.* those set over the ‘holy’ people of the Lord. *Destruction* (*herem*) is not destruction pure and simple but the destruction of what is abhorrent to the Lord (*cf.* Jos. 6:17; 8:26). Thus the court has reached the most dreadful of verdicts: not divine pardon (25) but the divine curse (28).

The word of the Lord (44:1–3b)

The parallel section (43:1–7) opened with the word *w^eattâ* (‘now then’), and the same word opens verse 1. As before, its purpose is not to contrast past and present but to guard against a wrong conclusion being drawn and the feeling that the last word has been spoken. The legal verdict of total destruction is not after all the end of the matter. The Lord has a word for Jacob/Israel to hear. And if only they will *listen* (1) they will learn that there is no need to *be afraid* (2). It is not judgment that is on its way (43:28) but refreshment (3ab).

1 The Lord starts this word of comfort by insisting that his people’s status before him is unchanged: they are still addressed as *servant* (*cf.* 41:8). *Chosen* is a perfect tense, pointing to a completed action.

2 *Made* (*cf.* 43:7) and *formed* (*cf.* 43:1, 7, 21) are participles (‘your maker ... potter’), indicating the unchanging relationship in which the Lord stands to his people. *Will help* is an imperfect, referring to the repeated acts of God as and when needed. The second stanza of the mid-section of the poem (see the outline above) links itself to the first by using the same titles (*servant* and *chosen*), but it is not just a literary device, it is a reiteration of comfort: the Lord really means what these words imply, an unchanged status and an irrevocable choice. The ‘un’ ending of *Jeshurun* (Dt. 32:15; 33:5, 26) is an affectionate diminutive; the rest of the name may be related to *yāšār*, meaning ‘upright’, *i.e.* what the Lord desired his people to be. If so, it is used here with loving irony, magnifying the love which continues despite failure to fulfil the maker’s intention. Is there a designed tension between *Jacob* (‘deceiver’) and *Jeshurun* (‘upright’); the one looking back to the failure of the people, the other looking forward to what they will yet be by grace? 32:15 uses a different word for *I will pour* but the thought is the same. Rain from heaven figures all those reviving, life-giving agencies of grace whereby the Lord,

through his Spirit, transforms the desert of his people's lives.

Blessing upon descendants (44:3c–4)

I will pour not only carries forward the truth expressed by the same verb in the preceding stanza but is a designed contrast with *I will disgrace* in the parallel stanza (28). The picture of verse 3ab is replaced by the reality of *my Spirit* (cf. 59:21). Likewise, the ‘negative’ reality of cleansing and forgetting the past (25) becomes the positive reality of new life from God. In 3ab the illustration was of new life imparted; now (4) the picture develops into that of new life displayed. It is not altogether easy to see how the NIV arrived at *like grass in a meadow*, but the MT (*b^ebēn hāšîr*) has been the subject of many suggested emendations.¹⁴ It is true that in the majority of its examples *bēn* is used as a preposition (‘between’) but it is, like many Hebrew prepositions, originally a noun (‘a between [place]’, ‘an “amongness”’) and this too is well exemplified.¹⁵ Here, ‘in the between-place of grass’ means ‘in among the grass’ and is a general picture of fresh growth and well-watered fertility.

Glad response (44:5)

This verse is in marked contrast to the implied silence of the people when invited to respond in the parallel 43:26. The three pronouns *one ... another ... another* (*zeh ... zeh ... zeh*) form an inclusio with the emphatic ‘I, even I ...’ of 43:25–26. Note also the same usage of *zeh* in the contextually identical Psalm 87:4–6. Membership of the people of God (on the pattern of Isaiah’s remnant; 8:11–20) is a matter of individual commitment. The work of the Spirit of God (3) is evident in individual response and a confessional people. Turning to the Lord (5ac) involves turning to his people (5bd); the one is inseparable from the other. *Say, call* and *write* are respectively, personal testimony of belonging to the Lord, identification with his people and commitment of life to the Lord. (On the *hand* as the person as agent see Dt. 6:8.) *Take the name* ($\sqrt{kānâ}$) is used of taking an

¹⁴ The LXX’s *hōs anameson hydatos chortos* is the equivalent of *k^ebīn hāšōr* (‘like a poplar of Hazor’), but this noun *bīn* is not found elsewhere in the Old Testament and, furthermore, none of the Hazors mentioned in the Bible (eighteen references) notes any fame for ‘poplars’. The name of a tree would make a suitable parallelism, but at the expense of pauperizing the illustration.

¹⁵ For *bēn* as ‘between-place’/‘middle’ see Ex. 25:22; Ps. 104:12; Je. 48:45. See *BDB* 107b for a fuller list.

additional name to register a new situation or state. The flow of the context to this point requires that the reference here is to the offspring of Jacob/Israel, *i.e.* not Gentiles coming to faith in the Lord and membership of his people (as Ps. 87) but formal Israelites becoming true Israelites; the people of God, through the Spirit of God, becoming all they should be.

c. The certainty of the Lord's promise (44:6–20)

In chapters 40 and 41 the folly of idolatry was exposed by contrast with the glory of the Lord. In chapters 43 and 44 the argument is reversed as by contrast with the absurdity of idolatry the glory of the only God shines out. The absurdity in the present case appears at first sight to be the worship of what, had chance been different, would have been used to cook lunch (15–17), but this is not the point to which Isaiah is leading. Rather, because it is what it is, the idol has no power to change the human heart (18–20) but leaves the idolater in the spiritual darkness and deception with which he started (9).

It may well be correct to think of verses 9–20 as intruding into the unity of an original oracle of salvation consisting of verses 8, 21–22, a court room drama designed for Israel's assurance (see Westermann, Whybray). But this is the sort of 'intrusion' that is part and parcel of the Isaianic 'mosaic', the free use of material to fulfil a new function in a new setting. And that verses 9–20 are deliberately placed in their present context cannot be doubted in the light of the structure of the whole section displayed above.¹⁶

¹⁶ It is quite another matter to doubt the Isaianic authorship of verses 9–20. The essential subjectivity of much of the argument here can be seen by noting that North can speak of this section as 'doggerel', whereas to Simon it is 'this masterpiece of Isaiah's poetry'. Duhm found the polemical and sarcastic tone of the verses at variance with the spirit of the prophet. But, in fact, the verses are neither sarcastic nor polemical but directly descriptive. The satire is in the facts not in the tone. Whybray finds the verses lacking 'Deutero-Isaiah's characteristic note of praise', and Westermann complains that the name Yahweh is absent, as is any reference to the Lord's dealings with Israel. But both commentators have detached the verses from their context, where all these topics exist in abundance. The fact is that we do not know the original context of these verses and have no right to assume that such a context lacked the notes of praise *etc.* On the other hand, they are very exactly situated in their present context with a clear function to fulfil. To say with North that if they were absent they would not be missed is to overlook the coherent presentation, from

This section is in two parts. Verses 6–8 are full of divine initiative as the Lord reassures his people, whereas verses 9–20 are full of human initiative. The idolater is busy making his idol and in the end is left, unchanged, to his own resources. The contrast is the message of the whole.

The Lord and his people (44:6–8)

Here we see the devastating exclusivity of biblical monotheism. Apart from the Lord there is *no God* and *no Rock* (nothing reliable to rest on, nothing active in salvation, see below).

A¹ King and Redeemer, the only God (6)

B The incomparable God, master of history (7)

A²Comforter, revealer, rock, the only God (8)

6 On *King and Redeemer* see 43:14–15. *Almighty*/‘of hosts’ (see 1:24) occurs here for the first time in chapters 38–55 and begins the contrast between the Lord and idols. He is, within himself, every possible power (and uses it as King/father and Redeemer/next-of-kin for the blessing of his people; verse 8). The idols derive from human power and exert no power in return. *The last* is not here ‘with the last’ as in 41:4 (where the thought is of purposive direction of history). Here the whole statement, *I am the first and I am the last*, concerns the nature of God. As *first* he does not derive his life from elsewhere (contrast the idols; verses 10–17) but is self-existing and self-sufficient; as *last* he remains at the end, supreme, totally fulfilled. *‘elohim* is the common noun for *God*, but in the light of a different word in the matching phrase in verse 8 we should probably give it a distinctive flavour as a plural of amplitude: ‘God in the fulness or totality of divine attributes’.

7 A challenge (*Who then is like me?*) is followed by the conditions that would have to be met in order to claim comparability. *Proclaim it*/‘call’ (with no object stated) is the verb $\sqrt{qārā}$, used (as in 40:26) of detailed control of the physical universe and (in 41:4) of detailed historical events. Here, therefore, it means ‘to be in executive charge’. To *declare*/‘tell it’ is to give an account of the event thus summoned into being. *Lay it out before* [‘for’] *me* ($\sqrt{‘ārak}$, ‘to order’) is used of getting all the details of the tabernacle right (Ex 40:4) and of putting a battle plan into effect (1 Sa. 17:8–9). It means ‘to get

42:18 onwards, of Israel’s double need and the Lord’s double reply.

everything in its right place and order', hence here, to set the event within a coherent plan of history. *What has happened since I established my ancient people* is largely interpretative. A literal translation would be, 'since my appointing an ancient people' or (cf. for the Hebrew construction, Ps. 4:7 <8>) 'to compare with my appointing ...'. Westermann, though he wishes to emend the words,¹⁷ explains them accurately by saying that a god proves his real and effective deity in as much as, over a long period, he has plainly guided a people's history.¹⁸ This final element in the Lord's challenge to the idol-gods is a demand for specific examples—had they, in fact, established and then cared for their people? The Old Testament stresses the exodus event as demonstrating the uniqueness both of the Lord and of Israel. (2 Sa. 7:23 uses the same verb, $\sqrt{s̄im}$, in 'to appoint for himself a name'.) Unlike the idols (18–20) he did not leave his people in their distress. The challenge, however, about the past, to show initiative (*proclaim*), understanding ('tell') and historical sense ('set in order'), becomes a challenge about the future and the ability to predict. *Foretell*/'tell' is translated *declare* in the second line of the verse, where it required an example of past executive action; here it is used of executive control of the future. The verb is strengthened by a dative pronoun 'for themselves', i.e. 'in their own interest', 'in support of their case.'

8 The point of the argument in verse 7 is not the exposure of the idol-gods but the contrasting glory of the God of Israel and, therefore, the security of Israel in such a God; hence, *Do not tremble*/'do not fear'. Trembling is showing fear, whereas the verb refers to feeling fear. *Be afraid* is an otherwise unknown verb ('*al-tīrhû*')¹⁹ for which variants on 'fear' are proposed. A possible meaning is 'to be scared, stupefied with fright'. The command not to fear is supported in turn by revealed truth, the sole deity of their God and his particular character. In (lit.) 'Did I not make you hear and [did I not] tell previ-

¹⁷ For *miššūmî* ('since/in comparison with my appointing'), Kissane prefers *mašmia'* *mē'ōlām* ('one who announced of old what ensued shall also declare what is to come'). *BHS* (cf. the RSV) has *mî hišmia'* *mē'ōlām* *ōt* ... *lānû*.

¹⁸ Westermann, *ad loc.*

¹⁹ '*al-tīrhû* (*do not be afraid*) exhibits a verb not found elsewhere. *BDB* tentatively proposes $\sqrt{rāhâ}$ ('to fear'), which Delitzsch affirms. From Arabic *KB* offers $\sqrt{yārā}$ ('to be stupefied with fright'). *Q^a* reads '*al tir'û*', the standard form of 'do not be afraid'. An emendation according to *Q^a* is tempting but a shade too easy. See the note in Watts at this point.

ously?²⁰ the ‘you’ is singular, whereas the opening imperatives are plural. The revelation has been public, to the nation as a unit. But what did the Lord tell? The most obvious answer is the particular work of God with which this section is concerned: his purpose to blot out his people’s transgressions. In spite of the threat of ‘utter destruction’ ([43:28](#)) they need not fear, for already he has declared his intention to ‘blot out’ their transgressions ([43:25](#)). To this comforting truth they *are my witnesses*. Their existing knowledge of divine truth can bring them all the assurance they need. As compared with the common plural word *^elōhîm* in the parallel verse [6](#), a singular noun *^elôah*²¹ occurs here, *Is there any God besides me?*, for the only time in Isaiah. It can only be in order to stress the singularity of the one and only God. ‘There is no Rock’ (omit *other*) is a symbol of refuge (cf. [Pss. 71:3; 95:1](#)), trustworthiness, changeless integrity ([26:4](#)) and reality as opposed to fantasy ([Dt. 32:31](#)). The Lord who brought Israel to birth ([Dt. 32:4](#)), the Redeemer and ruler ([Ps. 19:14 <15>](#)) is active in salvation ([Ex. 17:6](#); [Ps. 95:1](#)). The character of God is the ultimate assurance of his people.

The idolater and his god ([44:9–20](#))

By contrast with verses [6–8](#) all the initiative and activity is now on the human side. There would be no god if the would-be worshipper had not made it! This is another aspect of the Bible’s exclusivist monotheism: outside the Lord, who reveals himself, there are only the man-invented gods. Idolatry is not only ‘making god’ it is also ‘making god what you want him to be’.

A¹ The idolater and his idol: meaninglessness ([9](#))

B The profitless idol ([10–17](#))

B¹ It cannot rise above the one ([10–13](#)) who originated it ([10–11](#)), who, though skilful, is frail ([12](#)) and only has human beings as a model ([13](#))

B² It cannot rise above the material ([14–17](#)), which cannot change to become the

²⁰ *mē’āz* (lit. ‘from/at then’) must always be contextually translated. Thus in [2 Sa. 15:34](#) it means ‘previously/until recently’; in [Is. 16:13](#), ‘previously/earlier’; in [Is. 48:5, 7](#), an indeterminate ‘beforehand’. In [Ps. 93:2](#), however, it means ‘from the start’ (cf. [Pr. 8:22](#)). In the present passage ‘already/just now/previously’ is more suitable than ‘of old’.

²¹ It is not at all certain how or if these words are related to each other. See H. Ringgren and G. J. Botterweck, *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* (Eerdmans, 1970), vol. 1, pp. 267ff.

spiritual (14–15) or change to meet spiritual needs (16–17)

A²The idolater and his idol: deception of heart (18–20)

A¹ is linked with B¹ by the charge of profitlessness (*are worthless* (9) and *can profit him nothing* (10) are the same in the Hebrew, *bal yô’îlû*). B¹ has three stanzas as above. The first and the third are both poised on the thought of ‘humankind’: verse 10, *nothing but men* (*mē’ādām*); verse 13, *man [’ādām] in all his glory*. The second and third stanzas are thematically associated: verse 12, *the blacksmith* (*hāraš barzel*); verse 13, *the carpenter* (*hāraš ’ēšîm*). B² is in four stanzas. A four and a five line stanza devoted to the first topic (14–15) and a five and a four line stanza devoted to the second topic (16–17). The whole is a more or less consecutive ‘story’; the conclusion (A²) returns to the theme of A¹ (verse 9, *they are ignorant* (*bal yēd’û*); verse 18, *they know nothing* (*lō’ yād’û*) but takes up the ‘story’ of verses 14–17 by reiterating the absurdity of idolatry, here focusing on the blindness that cannot see just how absurd it is.

Commentators again complain that Isaiah (wilfully) misunderstood idolatry, but North’s reply to this is worth noting. He points out that classical writers could be every bit as scathing as Isaiah and quotes Horace: ‘Once I used to be an oak tree, a useless stick. A craftsman, however, ... preferred I should be a god ...’. He notes how verses 19–20 equally expose the ‘antic stupidity’ of the idolater and ‘seem to be aware of the almost crazy fear evoked by the idol’. But he especially emphasizes that not just Isaiah, but the Old Testament as a whole, ‘knows nothing of the distinction between an idol in which the god is supposed to reside and which may therefore be said to be identical with the god, and a symbol intended to remind the worshipper of God’s presence’. He concludes that ‘when all is said, crude idolatry is no better than the Bible depicts it.’²² Isaiah would agree, though omitting the word ‘crude’. The real offence to the so-called modern mind is not that Isaiah misunderstood idolatry but that his monotheism involves the serious assertion that there is no other god beside the God of Israel. But this passage is not a mere taunt. It is a penetrating analysis of the human need for the divine and an exposure of every man-made device (e.g. both the idol of old and today’s military, economic and market forces) to make life secure. In our generation we would nominate different ‘craftsmen’ from those of verses 12–13 and different constructs from those in verses

²² North, *Second Isaiah*, p. 40.

14–17 but the absurdity of devotion to the man-made remains.

The idolater and his idol: meaninglessness (44:9)

9 The verse moves from the makers (**9a**) to the idols (**9b**) and so to the devotees who speak on the idols' behalf (**9cd**). To *make* is 'to fashion, give shape to'. *Nothing* (*tōhū*) is 'meaninglessness, futility' (cf. 24:10). The meaning here is that to fashion an idol proves that the maker has no sense of meaning and purpose in the world nor any chance of achieving it. *The things they treasure/delight in* North calls 'their darlings'. Whatever he thought about the reality of idol-gods, Isaiah was in no doubt about the infatuation they inspired (here it is an infatuation of the emotions; in the matching verses **18–20** it is an infatuation of the mind). *Worthless* should be 'profitless', bringing no advantage. *Those who would speak up for them are blind/and as for their witnesses, they themselves*²³ do not see, neither do they know ...', i.e. they have no credibility as witnesses. The reason for this blind ignorance is given in verses **18–20**. *To their own shame* is 'in order that they may reap shame', i.e. 'be shown up as fools' (North; Whybray). The clause expresses purpose, for in the Old Testament the inevitable or obvious outcome is seen as part of the conscious will of the agent (**30:1**; Am. 2:8 [RV]). It is as if Isaiah were to say, 'But they must know what the end will be!'

The idol cannot rise above the merely human (44:10–13)

Isaiah points to the mere humanity of the craftsmen (**10–11**), their frailty (**12**) and the man-dominated conceptions governing their theology (**13**).

10 *Shapes* is a more correct translation of the verb translated *make* in verse **9a**. The idiomatic translation is more vivid: 'Whoever has shaped a god has cast an idol ...' (the same construction as in **1 Sa. 20:4**). His intention is to achieve the divine; his accomplishment is the material!

11 *He and his kind/B*ehold, all its associates—all those linked with the idol—*will be put to shame* (see verse **9d**). Two reasons are given for this. First, the craftsmen them-

²³ The pronoun here is marked by the Massoretes with the *puncta extraordinaria* (cf. Gn. 16:5; 18:8; GKC 5n). This was probably an early form of textual appraisal but its precise significance is no longer known. In Q^a the pronoun here is inserted above the line. Maybe the *puncta* expressed doubt if the word had a sure place in the text. But in the present case an emphatic pronoun is acceptable.

selves are ‘totally human’ (lit. ‘from man’), and secondly, if only they would gather round what they have made, *stand* and look at it, they would (lit.) ‘fear’ (the verb translated *tremble* in verse 8) over what they had done and (*infamy*) ‘be ashamed’ (as in verses 9d, 11a, ‘realize what fools they have been’). Isaiah adds (and the NIV omits) ‘all at once’; the sense of fear and folly would strike home at once.

12 This verse develops the emphasis on the ‘mere humanity’ of the craftsman. Skilful as the *blacksmith* (*hāraš barzel*, ‘metal-worker’) is, the finished product is dependent on *the might of his arm*. Yet people are expected to believe that what is only the product of human strength, indeed diminishing strength in regular need of outside sustenance, will suddenly become a thing of supernatural, self-sustaining strength! *Works* and *shapes* are imperfects, denoting stage-by-stage manufacture, whereas *forges* is perfect (‘and has made’), i.e. ‘till he has completed ...’. This leads the thought on to the ‘arm of his strength’ as the energizing factor in the process.²⁴

13 This verse introduces *the carpenter* (*hāraš ‘ēšîm*, ‘wood-worker’). Every sort of idol has a craftsman behind it; the blacksmith/carpenter contrast is the idiom of totality. Perfect and imperfect verbs again stress the process in manufacture. An opening perfect allows us to watch the work beginning (‘He has stretched out [his] line’), three imperfects show work in progress (*makes an outline*, *roughs it out*, *marks it*) and a final perfect (*shapes it*; not the verb so translated in verse 12) shows it continues ‘[till] he has made it’. *Makes an outline* and *marks* are the same word (*yētā’arēhû*) and should have the same translation (‘outlines it ... outlines it’), otherwise the intended stress on what the thing will finally look like is lost and with it the sense of climax as we come to *the form of man*. The finished product has nothing to draw on conceptually except the maker’s notion of the highest he knows: *of man in all his glory*/‘according to human beauty’. *Shrine* is ‘house’ and is probably used here in its ordinary sense; in this too the ‘god’ is like a person with a life-style modelled on its maker’s.

The idol is limited to the merely material (44:14–17)

Isaiah turns from the craftsmen of verses 10–13 and the ‘mere humanity’ of their skill,

²⁴ While the meaning of verse 12 is not in doubt, the text does raise questions. It begins, ‘A metal-worker, a chisel/axe and he works in the coals’. Even if we suppose a wider meaning for *ma^c* (... The smith cuts ...’). Delitzsch inserts *lô*, ‘The metal worker has a tool’.

fragility and ideas to the material on which they go to work. Verses 14–15 focus on the earthly product and the chance way in which one bit of it suddenly becomes divine. Verses 16–17 neatly use the same imagery to point to the way in which this earthly product, which does in fact minister to human needs (*eats his fill, I am warm*), is coupled with the supposition that it can also fulfil a divine ministry (*Save me*).

14 Isaiah offers a picture of a forester at work with any number of different trees.²⁵ The intention is not to tell a story but to create an impression—it does not matter what sort of tree it is! *He cut down* is an infinitive expressing intention: ‘Off to cut down cedars for himself! He had taken cypress and oak and grown them up strong for himself among the trees of the forest. He had planted pine, and the rain had made it grow.’ The verse begins with felling and ends with planting. The intention is to trace back to the origin. A full-grown tree is an impressive thing (even a likely residence for a god?), but it is in reality only a seed, a sapling which a human being planted and earthly nourishments brought to full growth. Note the repeated ‘for himself’ (omitted by the NIV). The forester was ‘just doing his job’; human purpose and profit was the motive. No thought of religion entered into the origination and fostering of what was soon to become divine.

15 Here the ‘for himself’ of verse 14 is explained: husbanding earth’s resources maintains life’s comforts. *Takes* and *warms* are perfect tenses expressing standard practice. Suddenly Isaiah breaks out with vivid imperfects (preceded by the amplificatory particle ‘*ap*; cf. 40:24; 41:10; 43:19): ‘Yes and he kindles a fire and bakes bread; why, he makes a god and bows in worship!’. The materials used to make the idol are incidental to all else, the leavings from an exercise in self-preservation!

16–17 The word *half* occurs twice in verse 16, *half of the wood he burns ... over* [half of] it ... *he prepares his meal*. The same ‘half’ is intended in each case, the repetition being meant merely to underline the use to which it is put. But verse 17 does not say ‘half’ or ‘the other half’ but simply ‘the remainder’. It was not even chosen, never mind first choice, but was just the ‘bit left over’; cf. (a different word) *what is left* in verse 19. Suddenly the surviving material becomes the all-important spiritual element: *Save me*.

²⁵ This use of the infinitive is well exemplified (Driver, 204; cf. 2 Sa. 4:10; Ho. 9:13) but comes as a surprise here. See *BHS* for the widely made suggestion that a verb, to which the present infinitive acts as an auxiliary, has been lost.

The idolater and his idol: deception of heart (44:18–20)

These verses are continuous with verses 14–17, in that the same scene is reiterated, and recapitulate verse 9 with a common emphasis on failure of knowledge. What the idolater actually does (14–17) is astonishing enough, but that he fails to see it as such (18–20) is doubly astonishing. Such a failure of human reason can only be explained by a deception of heart.

18 On *know* (*yāda'*) and *understand* (*bîn*)/‘possessing knowledge ... discerning the heart of a matter’, see 29:14. *Are plastered over* is probably the best translation of a slightly uncertain text. Whichever way the verb is taken²⁶ the question about what agent is intended or implied remains. There is no biblical problem in supposing that the Lord visits the idolater with mental blindness (see on 6:9; cf. 2 Thes. 2:10–11), but possibly Isaiah is hinting the other side of the same truth by attributing agency to the idol (2 Cor. 4:4 could even be a recollection of this passage). Dead though it is, it has this dread capacity. The *eyes* as the organs of perception are extended (as is the verb ‘to see’) to the perception of truth. *Minds* is ‘hearts’ (cf. 9:9 <8>). *Cannot understand* ($\sqrt{sākal}$) is used in general of ‘acting with prudence so as to achieve success’ (Jos. 1:8), but when it is specifically linked with the mind it means the ability to appraise, to sift truth from error.

19 *Stops to think* is ‘brings it to his heart’. The heart is again the organ of thought, and the phrase indicates exercising thought about something. This failure to ‘give the matter thought’ arises from the fact that (lit.) ‘there is no knowledge’, the facts are not there to think about. Furthermore, ‘there is no discernment’, so that even if the facts were known there is no ability to see their real significance. This is a devastating analysis of the mind of fallen humanity, covering the content of knowledge, processes of thought and capacity to discern. On *half ... what is left* see verses 16–17. The words chosen, *detestable thing* and *block of wood*, justify the charges against the mind of the idolater. First (19f), in respect of a doctrine of God (people should know intuitively that to give divine honours to a man-made ‘thing’ is abominable; cf. Acts 17:29); and secondly, in

²⁶ The form *tah* seems to derive from $\sqrt{tāhāh}$ (‘to be besmeared’). This would give here a singular verb with a plural subject (by no means infrequent in Hebrew; see GKC 1450), and a change to *tahu* (see KB) is pedantic. \sqrt{tuah} has a transitive meaning (‘to smear/plaster over’), but that would require *tāh* instead of *tah*, though a form with short ‘a’ is not impossible (see GKC 72dd; cf. Zc. 4:10), yielding ‘he has besmeared’.

respect of a doctrine of humankind (to prostrate the human before the material cannot be right [19g]).

20 We could translate *He feeds on ashes, a deluded heart misleads him* as ‘Feeder on ashes! The *heart* seduced! It has misled him!’ *Feeds on* [or pastures/herds] *ashes* may be a proverbial expression for doing what is silly and useless, but more likely it looks back to verses 15a, 16a and 19c. Some wood was used for fire, some to make a god, and therefore both ash and god are the products of the same thing. One might as well pray to dead embers! *Cannot* assumes (correctly) that the imperfect verb here is used with ‘potential’ force. The idolater is ‘hooked’ on the idol and has lost all capacity to free himself. The idolater holds his idol, the product of his own strength (his *right hand*; cf. verse 12), but the reality is that the idol now holds him and he cannot break free from the bondage of the *lie* (*šeqer*), this actual ‘false thing’.

d. The blessedness of Israel in the redeeming Lord (44:21–23)

With 42:18 two parallel movements begin. The first (42:18–43:21) opens with Israel in captivity and ends with the return home (43:14–21); the second opens with Israel in sin (43:22–24) and ends here with a call to return to the Lord (44:22). Within its immediate context the call to ‘remember’ (21) forges a link with what has preceded: (i) the idolater has been busy ‘fashioning’ (9–10, 12) his idol, but Israel has been ‘fashioned’ (21; NIV *made*) by the Lord; (ii) the idolater is bound to his idol (18–20), but Israel is the Lord’s bondman (*servant*; 21); (iii) the idolater prayed pathetically *Save me* (17), but to Israel the Lord says *I have redeemed you* (22–23); (iv) the idolater bowed to a block of wood/‘tree stump’ (*bûl ‘ēš*; 19), but now every tree (*kol ‘ēš*) is summoned to rejoice in the Lord (23). This theology is embedded in the Psalms and thus in the cult. When the Lord comes to reign over his people (Pss. 96–98) the curse will have been lifted from all creation, for he comes ‘to judge the world’, *i.e.* to set all things to rights, liberating the trees to clap and sing. Thus what is done for Israel has intrinsic universal implications. In this way the universal song in verse 23 is part of Isaiah’s preparation for the world-wide call of 55:1ff.

The tenses in verses 21–23 blend perfects, imperfects and imperatives. The imperfects must be considered as future tenses: ‘you will not be forgotten’ (21); ‘will display his glory’ (23). Correspondingly, therefore, some of the perfects can be treated as perfects of certainty (‘I have determined to redeem’; 22–23). But redemption also lies in the past for, following the exodus, Israel always looked back to a redemption already accom-

plished. In other words, in these verses Isaiah speaks from the standpoint of the cult: the sacrifices made contemporary what was achieved once for all at the Passover, and the worshippers could know there and then that their sins had been ‘wiped away’ (22). But, as [Psalms 96–98](#) show, the cult also looked forward to future and greater acts of the Lord. It fell to Isaiah, more than to any other, to formulate such expectations more fully.

- A The first command: the future assured by the past. Servant-status, arising out of the ‘fashioning’ work of the Lord, guarantees that Israel will not be forgotten (21)
- B The second command: reconciliation achieved by redemption. A total dealing with sin issues in a call to return (22)
- C The third command: the universal outcome of a particular work. All creation can rejoice in what the Lord purposes for Israel (23)

21 Mind and memory (*remember*) are of central importance. The deliberate recollection of who the Lord is, what the Lord has done, his promises etc. is a characteristic biblical emphasis. (See [Ps. 78](#) throughout, especially verses 9–11, 40–42; [42:6](#); and cf., in the New Testament, the institution of the Lord’s Supper as a continual reminder.) The second *my servant*/‘a servant of mine’ is slightly more emphatic than the first. The first notes that as *servant* Israel has access to a well-stocked memory of all that the Lord has done and, in the present context, the ability to appraise the blessed contrast of its own state compared with the foregoing picture of the idolater. The second traces servant-status to its root in the ‘fashioning’ ($\sqrt{yāṣar}$; cf. verses 9–10, 12) work of the Lord and its consequence in assurance for the future: *I will not forget you* is (lit.) ‘you will not be forgotten by me’.²⁷

22 The verb and the nouns in [22ab](#) (*swept*/‘wiped clean’ and *offences*/‘rebellions’) are the same as those in [43:25](#) (*blots out* and *transgressions*). Thus the section returns full circle to its starting point. *Cloud* and *mist* represent what is easily and completely obliterated (cf. [Ho. 6:4](#); [13:3](#)). *Return to me for I have redeemed you* is not (as Simon) ‘Given a

²⁷ The form *tinnāšēnî* is a passive with a suffix expressing an indirect object (Davidson [73/4](#); cf. [Ps. 109:3](#); [Zc. 7:5](#). [GKC 117x](#) notes that ‘Sometimes the remoter object ... is directly subordinated in the form of an accusative suffix’. [GKC](#) inexplicably disallows the present example, making the same emendation as [BHS](#) (the unimpressive *lō’ tin’šēnî*, ‘do not forget me’).

return to God, Israel will be ransomed', but (as Whybray) 'God's grace has not waited for Israel's repentance' or (as Wade) 'redemption as a motive for conversion, not conversion as a condition of redemption'. *Return* is not an invitation but a command. On the tense of *redeemed* see the introductory note above. On $\sqrt{gā'al}$ (*redeemed*) see 35:9f.

23 In the Bible, creation and redemption are part of the same 'package' of truth. Since the Redeemer is the Creator, the work of redemption has creational consequences. As Westermann has commented,

How wonderfully Deutero-Isaiah expresses the connection between the central point of divine action and its farthest horizon ... the mighty arch which, *sub specie Dei*, unites the destiny of the chosen people not only with that of the human race, but also ... with that of the entire created universe.²⁸

Has done this is the absolute use of the verb, 'has acted' or 'has determined to act'. *Earth beneath* (*tah^etîyyôt 'erêš*) is, as in Psalm 139:15, the earth as being below the heavens. This contrast (expressing totality) is continued in *mountains*/‘bare tops’ and *forests*/‘tree-clad slopes/valleys’. *All your trees* is (lit.) ‘every tree’, i.e. each individual item in creation. *Redeemed* is as in verse 22. *Displays his glory* is an imperfect and, in context, would be better as a future, ‘will display’. *Glory* is from $\sqrt{pā'ar}$ ('to be beautiful, fine'), which has cognate nouns *p^eér* ('beauty') and *tip̄'eret* ('finery') (cf. 3:18), and hence the verse ends ‘will display his beauty in Israel’ (cf. 2 Thes. 1:10).

D. The great deliverance (44:24–48:22)

This new section, along with its parallel 49:1–53:12, constitutes the logical next step in Isaiah’s presentation, and the parallels between the two agents involved are very closely worked out:

The work of Cyrus (44:24–48:22)

The work of the Servant (49:1–53:12)

²⁸Westermann, p. 144.

The task stated and the agent named (44:24–28)	The task stated and the agent named (49:1–6)
The task confirmed: to Israel and the world (45:1–7)	The task confirmed: to Israel and the world (49:7–12)
The response: prayer (45:8)	The response: praise (49:13)
Israel's disquiet (45:9–25) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> —The Lord's purpose affirmed (45:9–13) —Israel and Gentiles (45:14–22) —Those who find righteousness and strength in the supreme Lord and those who oppose him (45:23–25) 	Israel's despondency (49:14–50:11) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> —The Lord's love affirmed (49:14–16) —Israel and Gentiles (49:17–26) —The Servant, the exemplar of those who find strength and vindication in the almighty Lord (50:1–11)
The Lord's care for Israel—from the beginning through to the coming salvation (46:1–13)	The Lord's care for Israel—from the beginning through to the coming salvation (51:1–16)
Babylon: from the throne to the dust (47:1–15)	Zion: from the dust to the throne (51:17–52:12)
Redemption from Babylon (48:1–22)	Redemption from sin (52:13–53:12)

Isaiah has diagnosed a double need in the Lord's people, national bondage (42:18–43:21) and spiritual sinfulness (43:22–44:23). He now turns to say how these needs will be met. The anonymous emissary of 43:14 is named as Cyrus (44:28; 45:1), and the polemic of the Lord against the idols is brought to a climax in their unceremonious evacuation of the doomed Babylon (46:1–2). There is, however, another stream of thought throughout this section. The Lord's plan to use Cyrus is greeted with hostility (45:9–13), and the spirit of the people hardens until they can be called 'rebels' (46:8), 'stubborn-hearted' and 'far from righteousness' (46:12). Chapter 48, the very chapter which announces their liberation, is a storm-centre of denunciation, accusing them of being without title to the name of Israel (verse 1), stubborn (verse 4), idol-loving (verse

5), opinionated (verse 7), treacherous (verse 8) and having forfeited peace (verse 18). Thus, when they leave Babylon they do so with the Lord's sad comment that 'there is no peace for the wicked' (48:22). In a word, liberation solves only one problem, but in the meantime the need for a solution to the deeper problem of sin has become ever more urgent. So, Cyrus enters and leaves the stage of history. His task, the lesser solution, is done; the greater task awaits the greater servant.

There are seven subdivisions in this section:

A¹ Cyrus (44:24–45:8)

a¹ Rebuilder of Zion (44:24–28)

a² Irresistible conqueror (45:1–8)

B Israel (45:9–46:13)

b¹ In the face of complaint the Lord asserts his sovereign rights. Cyrus the builder etc. (45:9–13)

b² Israel still at the centre of the Lord's world-wide plans (45:14–25)

b¹ In the face of complaint the Lord asserts his ceaseless care. Cyrus the saviour (46:1–13)

A² Babylon (47:1–48:22)

a² Conquered (47:1–15)

a¹ Captives liberated (48:1–22)

1. The task of Cyrus (44:24–45:8)

Though for convenience we will consider this section in three divisions, it actually contains only two: *This is what the LORD says* (45:1) is a recapitulation of the same formula at 44:24, and the intervening verses are a series of participial clauses in which the Lord identifies himself. But note how 44:24, *who has made all things*/‘who does all’, and 45:7, *do all these things*, form an inclusio to the whole oracle. The oracle is followed by a joyful prayer for its speedy fulfilment (45:8).

a. Cyrus, the Lord's shepherd: Zion rebuilt (44:24–28)

Following the introductory formula (24ab), the poem opens with three single participial clauses (24d–f), then follow three double clauses (25ab, cd, 26ab), and finally a broken pattern of clauses (a three-line statement [26c–e], followed by a two-liner [27ab] and a four-liner [28]). The regularity of the development as far as verse 26 creates an

expectation which is not fulfilled. The brief two-line phrase of verse 27 hurries the reader forward to a climax in verse 28.¹ All the verbs are participles or their equivalents, making the utterance a statement of the changeless nature of the Lord.

- A Introduction: the Lord's self-announcement (24a–c)
- B The first movement. The past: only one God (24d–f)
- C The second movement. The ever-present: only one word (25–26)
- D The third movement. The future: only one purpose (27–28)

Introduction and first movement. The past: only one God (44:24)

The oracle opens with the Lord's threefold relationship to Israel: as *Redeemer* (*gō'ēl*; cf. 35:9f.) he identifies himself with the people in their need; as the one *who formed you* (*yāṣar*; cf. 43:1) he displays his personal 'touch' in bringing them into being; and with the reference to *in the womb* he traces the relationship back before there was a people at all, indicating, therefore, that the relationship arose out of the divine not human will. This provides the context for whatever follows. The Lord who made and does all (24d; 45:7c) acts from the perspective that there is one people whom he brought into being, fashioned with his own hand and to whom he has pledged next-of-kin care. The first triadic movement (24d–f) stresses that only one God lies behind all creational reality. There is nothing of which he is not the maker (24d) and no other agency alongside him (24ef). *Made*, *stretched* and *spread* are participles ('maker of', 'stretcher of', 'spreader of'), expressing an abiding relationship. The MT reflects divergent textual traditions and recommends *mē'ittî* (*by myself/from with me*, i.e. 'from and of myself'), indicating that the impulse to create proceeded solely from within the heart of the Creator and adding a significant new thought to the triad. It is easy, and usual, to change the vowels of the Hebrew to read *mî'ittî* ('who was with me?'; an interrogative affirmation meaning 'entirely by myself').

The second movement. The ever-present: only one word (44:25–26b)

Each element in this triad opens with a participle (25ac, 26a); the verb in each second line (coming at the end of the line in the Hebrew) is an imperfect, carrying forward the participial meaning but expressing repeated action. Thought moves from the word which is not fulfilled (25ab) to such wisdom as might be sought for guidance (25cd) and

¹ See O. T. Allis, *The Unity of Isaiah* (Tyndale Press, 1951), pp. 62ff.

then to the word which is implemented ([26ab](#)). *Signs* could be given to validate a message ([Dt. 13:1](#)) or be omens of the future ([Ezk. 21:21](#)). *False prophets* (*baddîm*) is used in [16:6](#), [Job 11:3](#) and [Jeremiah 48:30](#) of ‘idle talk’, but here and in [Jeremiah 50:36](#) it is apparently used of ‘boasters’, the pretentious talk of fortune-tellers.² *Makes fools of* is ‘bewitches’ or ‘drives mad’. *qōsēmîm* (*diviners*) is the general word for prognosticators, of which the ancient world was full (cf. [Dt. 18:9ff.](#)). In confirmation of Isaiah’s contention that their words are rendered worthless, Westermann notes that we now possess ‘astonishingly wide knowledge’ of Babylonian literature, including a ‘plethora of oracles addressed to Babylonian and Assyrian kings’, all of which are messages of hope without a single forecast of the doom about to fall.³ *Overthrows the learning of the wise* is ‘turns the wise back and makes nonsense of their knowledge’. The *diviners* claimed some supernatural backing, but the wise tried to apply accumulated human wisdom to life’s problems. It would be foolish to claim that such wisdom is always nonsense, but in this context Isaiah has in mind people’s attempts to probe and give meaning to the future and the meaning of history. The triad contrasts the *wise* ([25cd](#)) with the prophetic word ([26ab](#)) and, therefore, the human mind seeking meaning with the mind of God dictating events according to his will. (The eldila of Perelandra opened Ransom’s eyes to the Great Dance and led him to see ‘a simplicity beyond all comprehension, ancient and young as spring, illimitable, pellucid’,⁴ but afterwards he could not recall what it was.) Human beings cannot reach this ultimate simplicity, which is the key to all reality; it is for God alone and over it stands the divine word, ‘It is not for you to know’ ([Acts 1:7](#)). Our ultimate probings are an ultimate nonsense.⁵ In *the words of his servants* both words are singular in the Hebrew. The ‘servant’ could refer individually to Isaiah himself (North; Alexander; Birks) or collectively to ‘his servant-band’.⁶

² The alteration from *baddîm* to *bārîm* (from Babylonian and Akkadian cognates meaning ‘those who communicate the will of the gods regarding the future’) has attracted many. North suggests that *baddîm* may be a word-play deliberately combining both meanings.

³ Westermann, pp. 156–157.

⁴ C. S. Lewis, *Voyage to Venus* (Fontana, 1974), p. 203.

⁵ $\sqrt{sākal}$ (‘to have insight’). Here Isaiah ironically adopts the spelling of the latter, poking fun at the pretensions of human wisdom.

⁶ Instead of ‘servant’ the [LXX](#) has a plural, which [BHS](#) adopts.

The third movement. The future: only one purpose (44:26c–28)

The third triad applies to a particular case (the building of Jerusalem) the truth implicit in the second triad: that the word of the Lord directs all things. So here, the movement which begins with the predictive word (26c–e), promises the removal of obstacles (27) and ends with Cyrus, the city and the temple (28). To us, aided by hindsight, it is obvious that Cyrus was a ‘good thing’ in that he set the captive people free. The captives, however, seeing an even greater conqueror approach, would tend to fear an even stronger bondage. Hence Isaiah surrounds the first announcement of Cyrus with reassurances that the God who ‘does all’ is Israel’s Next-of-kin (24), and the conqueror will be the liberator and builder (28). History is run in the interests of the Lord’s people, even when it does not seem so.

27 There is here a recollection of the crossing of the Red Sea, the removal of every barrier to the people leaving Egypt and reaching Canaan (*cf.* 48:21 where exodus motifs are used for the return from Babylon).⁷ This suits the reference to Cyrus as *shepherd*⁸ (28; *cf.* Ps. 77:19–20 <20–21>), guiding the homeward march. The word *ṣûlā*, translated *watery deep*, is cognate to *m̄ṣullâ*, used of the Red Sea in Exodus 15:5. Thus verse 27 builds on verse 26, the Lord’s promises cover both the city and the journey home.⁹

28 This verse caps the sequence by answering the question ‘How?’ with a proper name, *Cyrus*. Such a detailed prediction has, of course, excited adverse comment and is taken to be a ground for insisting that these prophecies must be dated after Cyrus began his victorious rise. But first, if the fact of predictive prophecy is accepted, we are not in a

⁷ Wade finds a reference to the drying up of the sea at creation to make dry land appear, but quite apart from the fact that Genesis makes no reference to drying the sea, what would the relevance be here? Delitzsch finds an allusion to Cyrus’s strategem in diverting the waters of the Euphrates to gain access to Babylon, but according to Young ‘Cuneiform records have shown that Herodotus’ account [of diverting of the Euphrates] is untenable’.

⁸ Kings were called ‘shepherds’, as being the guardians of their people (see 2 Sa. 24:17; 1 Ki. 22:17; Is. 56:11; Je. 2:8; Ezk. 34:2, 5, 7, 23).

⁹ Whybray contends that if verse 27 refers to the exodus then it is out of chronological order. Why? Following his declaration that Jerusalem shall be inhabited (26), the Lord guarantees the new inhabitants safe passage home (27). This is the ‘chronology’ of the passage. Verse 28 is reserved as a final climax.

position to set limits to its exercise. Or to put the same point another way, in relation to Old Testament predictive prophecy the only source text we have is the Old Testament itself and, therefore, as with all source texts, we are (to say the least) much more under its judgment on this point than it under ours. We may say that we do not believe it, but we are not at liberty to deny what it affirms. Secondly, the prediction of a proper name occurs in [1 Kings 13:2](#) (*cf.* [2 Ki. 23:15–17](#)), which is indicative of the fact that when occasion demanded it prediction could be as detailed as this. Thirdly, this extra dimension of prediction is particularly at home in the context of Isaiah, who more than any other prophet made the prediction-fulfilment nexus the keystone to his apologetic.¹⁰ *He will say* is an infinitive expressive of intent, ‘being intent on saying ...’.¹¹ The conjunction preceding, the verb introduces an explanation of what has preceded, and we may translate it, ‘by determining to say ...’. This is exactly what happened ([Ezr. 1:1–5; 6:1–5](#)).

b. Cyrus, the Lord’s anointed: interlocking purposes (45:1–8)

As noted above, this oracle commenced at [44:24](#) and, following the long self-declaration of the speaker ([44:24–28](#)), the announcement formula is recapitulated at [45:1](#). The thought moves from reassuring Israel about Cyrus ([44:24–28](#)) to detailing the career of Cyrus and his place in the divine purposes. It is one thing to know that future events are designed for one’s comfort ([44:24–28](#)), it is another to find comfort in them when they start happening (*e.g.* verses [2–3](#)). Therefore, the Lord descends to particulars: Cyrus will be the most astonishing destroyer, but even so all is well. The section consists of an introduction ([1ab](#)) followed by six four-line stanzas. The first ([1c–f](#)) is an extension of the introduction, a statement about the Lord and Cyrus. Stanzas [2–6](#) are a unit, the Lord speaking to Cyrus. Each stanza has a domino link with the next, breaking in, access to treasure ([2d, 3a](#)); ‘the God of Israel, Jacob ... Israel’ ([3d, 4ab](#)); ‘... no other ... no God’ ([5ab](#)); ‘none besides me ... no other’ ([6cd](#)). Stanzas [2](#) and [7](#) open with the emphatic

¹⁰ Smart would excise all reference to Cyrus here, treating it as a ‘reinterpretation’ of Deutero-Isaiah by the fifth-century Jerusalem community. It is perhaps a sufficient comment to note Smart’s own stricture on those who would remove the name ‘Israel’ from [49:3](#) as ‘contrary to all good procedure in the critical handling of texts’. R. K. Harrison (*Introduction to the Old Testament* [Tyndale Press, 1970], p. 794) broadly concurs with Smart.

¹¹ GKC 114p; Driver, 206 (*cf.* [Ex. 32:29](#); [Lv. 10:10](#); [Am. 8:4](#)).

pronoun ‘I’, rounding out the poem. Within this integrated whole there is a theme of widening purpose. Stanzas 2–3 speak of a divine purpose for Cyrus ([3c](#), ‘so that you may know’); behind the Cyrus purpose is a purpose for Israel ([4a](#), ‘For the sake of Jacob’); and beyond this, a purpose for the world ([6a](#), ‘so that from the rising of the sun to the place of its setting’). Each of these key phrases opens with the same word (*lēma'an*, ‘so that’, ‘for the sake of’, ‘so that’). In addition verse [7](#) forms an inclusio with [44:24](#): ‘made all’ (‘*ōšeh kōl*), ‘do all’ (‘*ōšeh kol*’)—one God in creation and history.

A¹ Introductory statement: the Lord’s purposeful grasp of Cyrus ([1](#))

B¹ Divine leadership ([2](#))

C¹ Purpose for Cyrus ([3](#))

C² Purpose for Jacob/Israel ([4–5a](#))

C³ Purpose for the world ([5b–6c](#))

B² Divine self-declaration: the God of history ([6d–7](#))

The theology of this section is identical with [10:5–15](#) (compare [10:15](#) and [45:7](#)). [10:5ff.](#) emphasizes the justice of the Lord’s rule of history, [45:1ff.](#) its purposefulness.

It is sometimes suggested that this passage was proved by events to be mistaken. First, ‘Babylon was not forcibly entered, nor was it destroyed’.¹² But Babylon is not referred to by name here, and there is no ground for assuming an exclusive reference to this one item in Cyrus’ huge conquests. On the other hand, if we ask whether the passage has room for the evidence of the Nabonidus Chronicle¹³ that ‘the troops of Cyrus entered Babylon without battle’, we need look no further than verse [1](#). Secondly, ‘Cyrus did not become a convert’,¹⁴ and the world was not won to Yahwism. It merely saw a conqueror engaging in the surprising policy of sending captive peoples, all alike, back to their homes. And it is indeed true that, on entering Babylon, Cyrus engaged in a multi-faith exercise in which all the gods had won and all must have prizes. With equal aplomb he promulgated the decree of [Ezra 1:2–4](#), proclaiming that the Lord had brought him to world rule, and the decree preserved in the Cyrus Cylinder¹⁵ that all was

¹² North, *Isaiah*, p. 89.

¹³ *DOTT*, p. 82.

¹⁴ North, *Isaiah*, pp. 87–89; *Second Isaiah*, pp. 148–151.

¹⁵ *DOTT*, pp. 92ff.

due to Marduk. It could, however, have been different. The way was open for him to know and to do better. For among all the gods one was different, the God who was wise before the event when all the others were only wise after it (*cf.* 41:1–7). Skinner notes this point: ‘The conviction that Jehovah alone is God proceeds from the knowledge that He alone has foretold his [Cyrus’] appearance.’¹⁶ It must be pointed out, though, that Skinner has no right to make this claim on Cyrus’ behalf, for the ‘Deutero-Isaiah’ theory denies the Lord the glory of prediction, allowing him only sharpness of perception in seeing what was afoot once Cyrus was on the march. If this is the work of an unknown prophet ministering in Babylon after the rise of Cyrus, then the argument from prediction is deprived of force, for then the Lord too, like the ‘idol-gods’, is only wise after the event. In the event, however, Cyrus took the politically expedient course, and the divine purpose that he might know the Lord fell by the wayside, and along with it the full thrust of revelation to the world (see also on 48:20–21). In this sense, then, the present passage fell short of realization. It is not that it predicts that Cyrus would become a believer and he did not, but that it reveals a divine purpose into which Cyrus, with every opportunity to do so, failed to enter.

The Lord’s grasp of Cyrus (45:1)

The introductory formula (1ab) leads into the first four-line stanza. In this the first and third lines open with infinitives expressing purpose (*subdue ... open*), and the second and fourth continue the construction by means of imperfects, respectively a first person (‘and that the loins of kings I may ungird’) and a third person passive (‘and that gates ...’). From the earliest days of the monarchy the king was held in special awe, and ‘the Lord’s anointed’ (1 Sa. 24:6 *<7>*; 26:11) came to be a standard description of the king ideally considered (Ps. 2:2). It was a special, sacral relationship, not particularly specifying holiness of character (*cf.* 1 Ki. 19:15) but solemnly setting a person apart for the Lord’s purposes.¹⁷ To *subdue nations* is a specifically Davidic motif (Pss. 1, 110), and this hint of Cyrus in a Davidic role may have something to do with the disquiet we find in verses 9ff. On Cyrus see 44:28. The picture of Cyrus, *whose right hand I take hold of* combines the ideas of choosing, imparting strength, and leading the person out onto the

¹⁶ Skinner, p. 59.

¹⁷ J. A. Motyer, ‘Anointing’, *IBD*.

stage of history. *Subdue ... strip ... open ... not shut* well describe Cyrus's swift career of unbroken conquest, which was marvelled at in the ancient world. Here neither collective strength (*nations*) nor leadership (*kings*) nor double-leaved *doors* (?opening to palaces) nor city *gates* could halt him.

Divine leadership (45:2)

I is the emphatic pronoun, 'I myself'. *Mountains* (*h^adûrîm*)¹⁸ is not elsewhere known as a noun and looks like a passive participle qal from $\sqrt{h\ddot{a}d\dot{a}r}$ ('to honour'). The adjective *hādār* sometimes has a physical meaning; it is used of tall trees (Lv. 23:40) and of an impressive, well-built appearance (Is. 53:2). Possibly, therefore, the verb has a parallel ambience and can mean (in the passive) 'upraised', and hence its use here of barriers, natural or artificial, in the conqueror's path.

Divine purpose for Cyrus (45:3)

Opening with 'and', this stanza is continuous with the last. It adds one more item of divine help, the gift of treasure, and leads up to the purpose which lies behind it all. *Darkness* refers to what is hidden away. The suggestion of *BHS* that *so that you may know* is a later addition lacks manuscriptal support, and Whybray says this opinion 'is hardly justifiable'. Through the evidence of prediction and fulfilment it was possible for Cyrus to come to know the true God, and this is all the words intend. They do not say that Cyrus will do so but that his career has been so managed in the hand of God that this has been made possible. *Summons you by name*, here and in verse 4, expresses the idea of summoning personally to the performance of decreed tasks (40:26; 41:25). Had Cyrus enquired and consulted those who knew, he would have discovered his place and calling in the plan of *the God of Israel*.

Divine purpose for Jacob/Israel (45:4–5a)

The Lord's people are always his central concern. *Jacob ... Israel* is a reminder of the power of the Lord to transform (Jacob becoming Israel) and of the responsibility of those who find the Jacob-nature still strong in them to live rather according to their God-given new nature as Israel. *Servant* is the status given to the Lord's people; *chosen* shows its basis in the divine will. In the interests of his people the Lord sovereignly

¹⁸ For the MT's *h^adûrîm* both the LXX and Q^a (*hehārîm*) have 'mountains', and this is adopted by BHS. North toys with an Arabic cognate, meaning 'swollen/inflated'.

raises up world rulers, calling them *by name* (see verse 3) and bestowing on them a *title of honour*. On $\sqrt{kānā}$ see 44:5; it is not an honorific so much as a title appropriate to Cyrus's function within the plan of God. Such is the Lord's sovereignty that he does not require the willing or knowing co-operation of those he so uses: Cyrus does *not acknowledge me*/‘has not known me’. The time reference here would be to the beginning of the career of Cyrus. He stepped onto the world stage without any idea of the only God whose tool (10:15) he was to be.

Divine purpose for the world (45:5b–6c)

Apart begins a new stanza here. It repeats the closing thought of the preceding stanza and then lifts the career of Cyrus into a new dimension. If he had entered into the knowledge of the one and only God, which so readily lay to the gods who are only part of humankind's reaction to what life thrusts on them (41:1–7), world-wide revelation would have ensued. On such a simple step such a tremendous consequence was suspended! *I will strengthen* is an imperfect of continuous action ('I gird you', i.e. give you the prowess to fulfil my purposes). Here Cyrus is in mid-career, girded to military action, but still without knowledge of the God whose tool he is. The Lord's sovereignty is absolute, neither overriding responsibility nor requiring conscious co-operation. World-wide (*from the rising of the sun to the place of its setting*) knowledge of God was promised through Abraham and his descendants (Gn. 12:1ff.; 22:18) and the Davidic king (Ps. 72:8–11), and Isaiah is linking these very treasured ideas with Cyrus. This must be kept in mind as we come to verses 9–13.

The God of history (45:6d–7)

This is the conclusion to the whole oracle (cf. the link with 44:24 and the introductory note above) but in particular to verses 2–6. The review of the Cyrus period, with its stress on the sovereignty of God, is undergirded by this magnificent monergistic statement. *Light* and *darkness* are well established metaphors for the pleasant and the unpleasant; they are, of course, also the regular sequence of things, and either can be the meaning here. The Lord is executively behind all the diversities of experience which life contains; he also ordains the order in which things happen, the course of experience. *Prosperity* is ‘peace’, which, of course, includes well-being, prosperity, fulfilment, etc. (9:6 <5>), all that makes life rich and rewarding. The older translations made needless trouble by rendering ‘I create evil’; the NIV correctly has *create disaster*. Out of about

640 occurrences of the word *ra'* (which ranges in meaning from a ‘nasty’ taste to full moral evil) there are 275 instances where ‘trouble’ or ‘calamity’ is the meaning. In every case the context must judge. In this passage, full of historical calamities coming on people through Cyrus, this is what *ra'* means. Light and darkness are typically Zoroastrian themes, and some have seized on this as evidence of a Persian milieu for this verse. But there is no ground for finding a reference to Zoroastrianism here, and in any case the texts on which Zoroaster based his light/darkness dualism go back to about 1200 BC. If Isaiah is attacking anything it is the inherent dualism of polytheism or the sinful dualism of the human heart, which both longs for the security of one only God and yet jibs at the rigour of saying with Job, ‘Shall we accept good from God, and not trouble [*ra'*]?’ ([Jb. 2:10](#)). Isaiah’s intention is, however, not polemical but rather credal and comforting. This God, who is solely and sovereignly, determinatively and executively, in charge of everything and is the God who made all ([44:24](#)) and makes all ([45:7](#)), is the Holy One and fashioner of Israel ([44:24](#)), the redemptive Next-of-kin ([45:1](#)) of his people.

Prayer and response ([45:8](#))

This verse is another case where textual difficulties¹⁹ do not blur the overall meaning. It is in essence a prayer for those heavenly showers which will produce fruits of blessing on earth. In context (whatever its original setting in Isaiah’s ministry) it is the product of a mind and heart that can brook no delay in the accomplishment of the benefits that will come to Israel through Cyrus. The NIV follows [Q^a](#) in reading a singular verb (*spring up*) where the [MT](#) is plural. Its translation *grow with it* represents a verb (the hiphil of $\sqrt{\text{šāmāh}}$) that is invariably transitive in meaning (‘cause to grow’, ‘produce’). The [MT](#) can, however, be preserved if we make ‘salvation and righteousness’ the subjects of the plural verb ‘be fruitful’ and understand ‘earth’ as the subject of the singular feminine verb ‘cause to grow/produce’ in [8e](#):

¹⁹ Instead of *har’ipū* (‘rain down’), [Q^a](#) and the [LXX](#) concur in the unimaginative and obvious *hārī’ū* (‘shout aloud’). The use of ‘to open’ without stated object ([22:22](#); [2 Ki. 15:16](#)) makes it unnecessary to follow [BHS](#) and Westermann in altering to a passive. Presumably in translating *grow*, the NIV is adopting the [BHS](#) alteration of *taṣmīah* to *tiṣmah*.

^aThe St Mark’s Isaiah Scroll from Qumran.

A Prayer (8a–e)

a ¹	The imagery of rain	Rain down, O heavens, from above, and let the very clouds distil righteousness.	(figure) (reality)
a ²	The imagery of growth	Let the earth open; Let salvation and righteousness be fruitful; Let it make them grow together.	(figure) (reality)
B	Assurance (8f)	I myself, the Lord, will surely create it.	

Just as natural fruitfulness requires the fertilizing action of heaven on a responsive earth, so spiritually, only God can give the increase by ‘raining down’ ($\sqrt{rā'ap}$; only found in [Ps. 65:12 <13>](#) ; [Pr. 3:20](#)) *righteousness*, i.e. his absolutely right purposes, those things which match his righteous nature. The ‘opening’ earth is an attractive figure of responsive welcome to what God sends. Just as there is no fruit without his fertilizing, neither is fruit produced without response. Lines d and e repeat the pattern. The seed the Lord plants is *salvation*, the ‘deliverance’ ([25:9](#)) he had promised to his people through Cyrus ([44:28](#)), and *righteousness*. The noun used here is feminine ($s^e\ddot{d}āqā$), whereas in line a it was masculine ($sedeq$). G. A. F. Knight thinks the masculine describes God’s action (e.g. [Ho. 2:19](#)) and the feminine, ‘that creative, loving activity between persons ... inspired and empowered by God’s initial act of *sedeq*’.²⁰ This distinction should not be overpressed, but it is suitable here in explanation of the feminine (which could, of course, be merely a literary variation), indicating that the ‘righteousness’ which he implants is naturally fruit-bearing in righteousness of life and relationships. But again, there must be earth’s responsive commitment (‘Let it make them grow together’), accepting the Lord’s salvation, living his righteousness. To the prayer for fulfilment the Lord responds with reassurance, committing himself personally (‘I, myself’, the emphatic pronoun) to do what he alone can, to ‘create’ ($\sqrt{bārā}$; cf. [4:5](#)). The perfect tense (cf. the NIV) is an expression of certainty, meaning ‘am determined to’.

2. Impermissible questions: the sovereign Lord (45:9–13)

²⁰ Knight, *Isaiah 56–66*, pp. 2–4.

Is Isaiah here simply envisaging a quibbling reaction to the Lord's Cyrus-plan or did he actually face demurals when he first said that this was how liberation would be achieved? Either way, it stands to reason that the news of a Gentile liberator would not receive an ecstatic welcome (see further on verse 9). Not only so, but it is easy to undervalue those acts of God which are 'merely' the exercise of divine providence. Undoubtedly, given the human propensity for the sensational, they would have wished for something 'miraculous'—but conquerors belong 'only' to the course of history! The reply to their remonstrations was sharp: in a word, 'It's none of your business.' The potter cannot, and the parent must not, be questioned; within their own spheres they possess total sovereignty (verses 9–11). So it is with the Lord. Neither as Creator nor as ruler of history (verses 12–13) is he available for questioning. He is sovereign and there the matter ends.

A The potter and the parent (9–11)

a¹ Illustration (9–10)

a² Application (11)

B Divine acts beyond question (12–13)

b¹ In creation (12)

b² In history (13)

a. The potter and the parent (45:9–11)

9 *Quarrels*/‘goes to law with, takes court action against’ expresses not the thought of resisting what God is doing but of disputing his right to do so. *Maker* ($\sqrt{yāṣar}$) is used specifically of a ‘potter’ (43:1). The artefact (*a potsherd* [omit to him who is, but]) cannot question the artisan, not because it cannot talk but because his authority cannot be questioned. No piece of pottery is in this regard different from any other. All *potsherds* occupy the same position of total subordination to a total sovereign. ‘*What are you making?*’ would question the potter’s intentions, ‘*He has no hands*²¹’ his abilities. In relation to the Cyrus-plan this criticism was inevitable. What can the Lord be thinking of by destroying our hopes? How can he ever bring it off by using a conqueror to liberate? For by using a Gentile conqueror to liberate Israel it was not only the pride of the nation

²¹ The translation ‘no handles’ (RSV) lacks any certain example of the word *yād* in support. A charge of incomplete work is not particularly relevant here in any case.

that was threatened but the Lord's promises. Under a Gentile liberator the people would in principle return to the same situation from which they had been deported. The times of the Gentiles would continue in Jerusalem. There would be no sovereign state, no Davidic revival! The Cyrus-plan was the death-knell to all such hopes. We, of course, have the benefit of hindsight and know that the breaking of the nation-mould of the people of God was deliberate, in order that the ultimate form of Israel might emerge in the church of the Lord Jesus Christ. We also know that the submission of the Gentiles ([14–25](#)) is secured by the submission of believers world-wide to the gospel ([Acts 15:13–18; 1 Cor. 14:24f.](#)). But Isaiah's folk could see only a cruel blow to their hopes, the exchange of one subjugation for another, and their logic was right. The old mould was irretrievably broken and this is an experience which flicks everyone on the raw (now as then). Isaiah's task, however, was to detach their minds from submission to human logic and inculcate a spirit of submission to the divine sovereignty.

10 If the potter cannot be questioned ([9](#)), the parent must not be. Such questions are an improper intrusion where no outsider may venture. Parenthood is within the discretion and privacy of the couple concerned and is not subject to indelicate, inadmissible interference. *His father ... his mother* is rather 'a father ... a woman/wife'. Isaiah is raising an issue in principle.

11 The verse opens by asserting a parent-child/potter-pot relationship between the Lord and Israel, and then proceeds to application. In this context, the exodus name *the LORD* particularly recalls [Exodus 4:22](#) (*cf. Dt. 14:1*). The exodus was a great act of parenting, establishing a pattern of relationship between the Lord and his people. Also, in a very particular sense, it initiated a process of 'moulding' (*Maker/Potter*; see verse [9](#); [43:1](#)), with the Lord presiding over the fortunes of his people with all the exquisite skill of a master-potter, pressing, shaping and holding. In all this he is *the Holy One of Israel*, both close to them in pardoning mercy and at the same time transcendent God and king (see [6:1–7](#)). Their relationship to him is close and tender but is one in which they must learn not to presume but to take the lowest place, 'to walk cautiously and carefully with their God' ([Mi. 6:8](#)). Hence the remainder of the verse exclaims, 'Of things to come, ask me! About my sons and the work of my hands, please command me!' The words are heavy with irony, as the preceding illustrations allow. The *things to come* are the Cyrus-plan; *my children/sons* and '*the work of my hands*' refer to the illustrations of parent and

potter. To question the Lord about his actions is as impossible as the one and as improper as the other. It is a rebuke certainly: Keep in your place and mind your own business. It is full of comfort also: Your place makes you secure in the sovereign care of your God.

b. Divine acts beyond question (45:12–13)

12 The irony of verse 11 (paraphrasing: ‘Please feel free to give me your orders’) is crowned by the reference here to the Creator—as if the Lord were to say, ‘After all, I am only the Creator!’. Recollection of his fourfold sovereignty over *mankind* (37:16) is contextually a telling point. The word *starry* is an interpretative addition and may be correct. The parallelism would, however, suggest that *their ... hosts* here refers to mankind in all its multiplicity. *Marshalled/‘commanded’* ironically repeats the same verb as ‘give orders’ in verse 11e.

13 Divine sovereignty in creation (12) is matched by equal sovereignty in history. Like verse 12, this verse opens with an emphatic pronoun and should have a parallel translation, ‘It is I who ...’. *Will raise up Cyrus* is a perfect of certainty. *Cyrus* is interpretative: it is (lit.), ‘have determined to raise him up’. The verb is the same as in 41:2, meaning ‘to rouse as from sleep’ and therefore refers to the absolute start of Cyrus’s career. *In my righteousness* is simply ‘in righteousness’ (cf. 41:2). *He will* is an emphatic pronoun: ‘it is he who ...’. Commentators who see 43:3–4 as promising the conqueror Egypt as his reward find difficulty with this verse. Wade removes *not for a price or reward* altogether (though without explaining why anyone would have inserted it!). North feels the prophet was not worried about consistency; Whybray says the present verse refers to Cyrus’s motive, not to what happened. But to interpret 43:3 as looking back to the exodus leaves the two passages in harmony.

3. A world plan, a central people (45:14–25)

At the heart of this complex of oracles (see the outline) lies this important section on the place of Israel at the centre of the Lord’s plan for the world. In context it replies to the assumption behind verses 9–13 that the Davidic promises have been forfeited in a Gentile take-over represented by Cyrus.

The passage is divided into two sections (14–17; 18–25) by two announcement formulae (14a, 18a–g). In verse 14²² the world turns submissively to Israel; verse 15 is a testi-

mony of one to whom the Lord's ways have suddenly become clear; and verses 16–17 are a comparison between idolaters reaping shame and Israel receiving eternal salvation. It is possible to arrange verses 15–17 as two four-line stanzas but whether this is their original shape cannot be affirmed. The long, credal announcement formula (18a–g) suits the universal theme of the second subsection, and verses 18h–25 are 'strung' on the theme of the Lord as the only God and Saviour (18h, 21ef, gh, 22c, 24a). It is a vigorous poem in which thoughts come tumbling out: the openness of the Lord's revealed truth (18h–19), the ignorance of idolaters (20) and the world-wide invitation (21–25). We note, however, the thematic unity into which all this material has been brought: verse 14 (the world turning to Israel) and verses 21–25 (the world turning to the Lord) form an inclusio by contrast; the Lord's concealed ways (15) contrast with the Lord's open revelation (19); the confusion (16) and ignorance (20) of idolaters are parallel; and the Lord is described as Saviour (15, 17, 21g). Both sections end with the salvation of Israel (17, 25). The submission of the Gentiles in the interests of finding Israel's God (14) and the open invitation to the Gentiles to come to the Lord for salvation (21–25), far from being contradictory thoughts, form the single theological heart of the passage. The principle is that those who would enjoy the truth must first be received among those who already possess it, but once received they discover that there are no grades of membership but an equality.²³ Since in Isaiah's time the people of God, his 'church', was constituted as a nation among nations, the incoming of the Gentiles is represented in terms typical of

²² Throughout verse 14 *you* is feminine singular. Mowinckel alters it to masculine singular and creates a reference to Cyrus. This suggestion perishes decisively by the admission of the nations that they are drawn by the realization that *God is with you*. Indeed, far from there being any likelihood that the verse refers to Cyrus, it is much more probable that Isaiah used the feminine pronoun in order to exclude such a misunderstanding. Note that in verse 17 he reverts to the masculine, referring to Israel. But here we are within the same area of thought as 2:2–4, where Zion magnetizes the nations because it is the centre where the Lord's word is to be found. The verse belongs naturally among Isaiah's Zion poems.

²³ The same ideas of submission and equality are found e.g. in Ps. 47. In the psalm, verses 1–5<2–6> and 6–9<7–10> run in parallel. In the first section the Lord's kingship means that 'he will subdue peoples under us' (verse 3<4>); in the parallel verse 8<9>, the nobles of the peoples gather 'as the people of the God of Abraham'. Isaiah's thought is rooted in Israel's worship.

national surrender, but we need to be careful not to confuse the motif with the reality.

a. Gentile submission, Israel's glory (45:14–17)

14 The nations come but not out of weakness, for they bring wealth with them (*products* and *merchandise*) and natural prowess (*tall*/‘men of stature’). Their submission is not feigned but real (they *will be yours*); they will take second place (*they will trudge*/‘walk behind you’), make themselves captives (*coming ... in chains*) and give voluntary homage (*they will bow down*) as suppliants (*they ... plead*/‘pray, request’ *with you*). Behind it all is a religious motivation: they recognize Israel as the people of the one God. As 2:2–4 indicates, this is the magnetism the people of God were intended to exercise. On *Egypt*, *Cush* and *Sabeans* see 43:3. Isaiah sees the future through an exodus spectrum. The nations then subordinated to Israel are typical of those who will one day seek voluntarily the blessings Israel has in the Lord. All the pronouns in this verse (e.g. *to you*) hold emphatic positions. National barriers are transcended (*they will come over*), reality of membership is achieved (*they ... will be yours*) and a new style of life (*behind*/‘after’ *you*) is followed. Since there is no reference to any preceding war, the chains symbolize voluntary acceptance of subject status. (See Ps. 149:8 where chains are part of the metaphor of winning the world to the Lord in the warfare of the saints.) *God ... god is 'el ... 'elōhîm* (cf. 44:6, 17; 1 Cor. 14:24f.).

15 This could have been spoken by the new converts, amazed at the revelation of a God who had never previously attracted their attention. Alternatively, it could be a comment from Israel in the light of events: how concealed indeed are the purposes of God when the enforced submission of Israel to the Gentile Cyrus is but a passing veil over the ultimate truth of Gentile submission to Israel! Who but the Lord could bring the Gentiles to Israel by appearing to do the reverse? *God and Saviour of Israel* misrepresents ‘God of Israel, Saviour’. Whoever the speaker is in this verse, the Lord has revealed his saviourhood in gathering in Gentiles; it is their salvation which excites wondering comment.

16–17 These verses form a concluding summary. Perfects of certainty declare that *makers of idols* ‘are doomed to reap shame and disgrace’. It cannot be otherwise; there is only one God (14) and Saviour (15). *ṣîrîm* (*idols*) is only found in Psalm 49:14 <15> where it is translated ‘forms’, i.e. the outward shape of a person. In other words, idols are nothing more than outward shape. *Will go off* is the same verb as ‘they will walk

after/behind you' in verse 14. These are alternative destinies, conditional upon being joined to the Lord's people or to idols. The *But* before *Israel* should be omitted. Isaiah ends with two juxtaposed statements without any connecting particle. The great name Israel must now include the saved of the Gentile world. The link between *Saviour* (15) and *saved ... salvation* (17) demands this. A narrower reference excluding the world-wide dimension would be inadmissible. (The same applies at verse 25.) This salvation is (i) *by the Lord*, (ii) *everlasting* in duration and (iii) cannot be lost, for it excludes, on the same *everlasting* footing, the *shame* and 'disgrace' which was the portion of those who clung to other gods.

b. Gentile salvation, Israel's glory (45:18–25)

These verses speak of the Lord in creation (18), revelation (19), salvation (20–22) and affirmation (23–25).

18 The opening *For* of this verse makes this second section explanatory of the first and, in particular, of the note of world-wide salvation, the 'world Israel', on which it concluded. Four verbs describe the Creator's work: he initiated (*created*), moulded (*fashioned*, as a potter) until all was done (*made*), and imparted stability (*established*) to the finished work. The evidential value of the work of creation is that *he is God* (Ps. 96:5). Now Isaiah repeats two of the verbs. The work of creation did not result in meaninglessness (*empty*, *tōhû*; cf. 24:10); rather what God found meaningless he shaped to be a world of people (*to be inhabited*). Thus the world's people are within the purpose of the one and only God.

19 The perspicuousness of the Lord's word is the subject of this verse. In gentle rebuke of Israel's amazement at a God who 'hides himself' ($\sqrt{sātar}$) (15), the Lord insists that he never spoke *in secret* (*sēter*, 'under cover') so that his word was not openly available, nor *in a land of darkness* where it is easy to miss the way, *i.e.* his word is a plain word and not intrinsically puzzling. It is certainly not misleading, nor does it deal in deceitful commands or promises whereby people would follow them and end up in a maze of 'meaninglessness' (*tōhû*, 'vain'). The Lord's word is not shifting sand but solid ground. He speaks *truth*/righteousness' and *what is right*/plain/straightforward things'. The former is the content of the divine word (truth in conformity to an absolute norm); the latter is the expression of the truth plainly and without duplicity. The verbal link with verse 15 makes all this refer in particular to the truth of Gentile hope.

20–21 The interpretation of these two verses turns on our understanding of *fugitives from the nations* (20) and *this* in *who foretold this* (21). The common opinion is that the *fugitives* are those who survived the conquests of Cyrus and were thus in a position to appreciate what the Lord had done, and that *this* refers to the career of Cyrus, by the foretelling of which the Lord demonstrated his unique deity. All this, of course, fits in with the broad sweep of these chapters in Isaiah²⁴ but poorly in the immediate context and within the particular structure of 44:24–48:22.

In the central chapters of the section (45:9–46:13) Cyrus has dropped into the background and Isaiah's concern is that Israel should be enabled to see the Cyrus-event in the context of the Lord's world-wide and eternal purposes. The immediate context focuses on these purposes as they touch the salvation of the Gentiles. As we have seen, verses 14–17 and 18–25 share this theme but from differing perspectives. The former being written from Israel's point of view (Israel's centrality secured by the submissive approach of the Gentiles as they come into the blessing of salvation), and the latter from the point of view of the Gentiles (to assure them of the reality and co-equality of their membership). Unless we are to divorce verses 20–21 from this context, then the *fugitives* are those who have come to Israel to find the Lord, thus escaping the fate that awaits idolaters, and *this* refers to the Lord's determination to take a world-wide people for himself. The fulfilment of this prediction reveals the reality of his deity as the saving God (21), provides ground for the command to the *ends of the earth* to turn and be saved (22) and prepares for the affirmation of verses 23–24b and the conclusion (24c–25). In form verses 20–21 are a court drama. The court is called to order (20ab), the point to be contested at law is stated (20cd), evidence is demanded—the argument from prediction and fulfilment (21a–d)—and the verdict is announced (21e–h). Note that it is no longer deity as such that is the issue but where a saving God can be found.

20 The MT adds 'all together' (*yahdāw*)²⁵ to *assemble*. *Fugitives* (*pālīt*, 'escapers'; cf. Gn.

²⁴ Advocates of the Deutero-Isaiah hypothesis are hard put to find earlier prophecies to justify what is claimed here, holding as they do that the reference is to Cyrus. North thinks of chapter 13 (which he denies to Isaiah); Whybray appeals to Je. 30:3; 31:8. In fact, there are no other prophecies which quite meet the need. Is. 13 would be best, but the Jeremiah passages are too broad. The questions in verse 21 require detail—the name, rise, career, victory of the conqueror—and the crowning surprise of the liberation of the deportees.

[14:13](#)) implies danger, here the danger of lingering in idolatry and ‘reaping shame’ ([16](#)) and coming under divine hostility ([42:13, 17](#)). *Ignorant* is ‘they do not know’, as in [44:9, 18](#): false religion begets mental blindness. *Carry about* refers to the *idols* being paraded in religious processions on great festival occasions, but the thought of being carried also implies helplessness (*cf.* [46:1–7](#)). *Idols of wood*/‘the wood of their idol’ emphasizes the material nature of such a ‘god’. In *gods*/‘a god’ the noun *’ēl* is selected for irony—‘a transcendent one who cannot save!’ *Cannot save* is attached to the noun as an attribute, *i.e.* (*lit.*) ‘non-salvific’ but more exactly, ‘are characterized by an inability to save’. In other words, this inability is not a lapse but an inherent defect.

[21](#) The verbs are abrupt, simply ‘Tell’, ‘bring near/present’. The NIV rightly sees that the evidence to be presented touches on predictive ability but the words (possibly a conventional court usage) just invite the presentation of the case. *Let them ...* is preceded by *’ap*, the ironical particle (‘By all means let them take counsel together’), as if the defendants suddenly realized the hopelessness of their case and asked for an adjournment to put their heads together! On *this* see the note on verses [20–21](#) above. We need look no further than Isaiah himself for prediction of the co-equal ingathering of the Gentiles ([2:2–4; 9:1 <8:23>](#); [11:10; 19:23–25; 25:6–9; 27:13; 42:1–4](#)), but in essence the matter reaches back to the Abrahamic promises ([Gn. 12:1–3; 22:18](#)). A *righteous God* is, according to verse [19](#), a God whose word can be trusted. It is, however, much more than this: a God ever true to himself, not least in the creational purposes indicated in verse [18](#), and at its deepest, acting in a way that satisfies his own moral holiness (*cf.* [1:27; 4:4](#)).

[22](#) *Numbers 21:8–9* does not use the same verb as *Turn to me* but perfectly illustrates its intention. *Be saved* is an imperative expressing the sure outcome of the act, ‘and your salvation will be certain beyond doubt’. The meaning of *all you ends of the earth* could not be put more clearly than by Schoors (who subsequently argues against their universal significance): ‘Israel’s salvation would not only be seen by the world, as is said in other pericopes, but the whole world itself would be invited to be saved. This is the most obvious meaning of the text.’²⁵ The fugitives are not a restricted company; any who

²⁵ Instead of *yahdāw*, Q^a offers *w^e’ētāyū* (‘and come’). A good parallelism but, according to North, ‘not to be preferred’.

²⁶ A. Schoors, *I am God your Saviour: A Form-critical Study of the Main Genres in Isaiah xl–lv*, VTS,

wish may escape the peril of idolatry and find salvation by ‘turning their faces’ to the Lord. Salvation is grounded in monotheism: *for I am God* (‘*ēl*). In contrast with the ‘*ēl* who is non-salvific

(20d), here is a God whose nature includes salvation.

23 *By myself I have sworn* is taken word for word from the Abrahamic promise (Gn. 22:16). *My mouth* is (lit.) ‘a word has gone out from my mouth’. Just as ‘to see with the eyes’ (Dt. 4:3) is ‘to see personally or for oneself’, so ‘to speak with the mouth’ is to make a personal statement, ‘I have myself spoken’. *In all integrity* is ‘[in] righteousness’. Since no preposition is expressed in the Hebrew here, ‘righteousness’ could be the subject of the sentence, in apposition to ‘word’. It would then mean ‘an absolute truth’ (cf. verse 19). It is probably best, however, to take the noun adverbially as a word invested with all the Lord’s righteous character. The word which *will not be revoked* (cf. 55:11) is like an active emissary which will not fail to complete its allotted task. On *Before/‘To’ me every knee* Westermann comments: ‘The crucial change is made in the concept of the people of God ... a final break ... between the people of God and any form of existence as a political entity ... [Membership] is based on the free confession of those who have discovered that he alone is God.’ Those who feared that the old mould would be broken (9) were justified in their fears—but the new mould is far more glorious. The evidences of membership are worship (*knee*) and confession (*tongue*).

24ab The verb *they will say* is singular and possibly distributive, meaning ‘each will say’, or indefinite, meaning ‘one will say’/‘will be said’.²⁷ This is the confessing *tongue* of

24 (1973), 23–26. Many agree that though the words seem to imply a universal saving purpose this is inadmissible. The reasons for this view are that universal salvation is not elsewhere evident in chapters 40–55, and that in verse 24 Israel’s enemies are destined for shame, in contrast to (25) Israel’s salvation. But the salvation of the world is very much Isaiah’s thought (cf. on 41:21–42:17). It rests not on individual verses alone but much more on the thrust of the whole argument. In 52:10 the ‘ends of the earth’ (the only other occurrence of the phrase in chapters 40–55) are invited to watch the Lord’s saving acts, not as a cruel act of making their mouths water but as a preliminary to the universal invitation of 55:1. Furthermore, it is clear in the present passage that ‘those who are incensed’ are only one section of the Gentile world; there are also the God-seekers (14) and the escapees (20). Regarding ‘Israel’ (17, 25), Schoors fails to see that a national interpretation destroys the whole movement of thought in verses 14–17 and 18–25.

²⁷ Many alterations are proposed in verse 24. Instead of *lī ’āmar* (‘of me each affirms’) Q^a has *lī*

verse 23. Righteousness is a plural of amplification, meaning full or true righteousness'. In verse 19 'righteousness' meant 'reliable, absolute truth' but in verses 21 and 23 it connotes the deeper notion of the righteous character of God. The plural requires fullness of meaning, *i.e.* all that makes people right with God, knowing his truth and conformity to his character and requirements. The sufficiency of the simple look to him (22), all we need is *in the LORD alone*. On the implication of 'imputed righteousness' see 53:11. The outward accompaniment to the inner reality of righteousness is the *strength* to live by this new relationship and status. *Will come to him* is a singular verb and follows immediately after 'righteousness and strength'. The preposition *to* ('*ad*) means 'right up to' and would be an odd usage in relation to those who *raged against him*, but is significant in relation to each who knows his righteousness and strength: 'right up to him shall each come' (*cf.* 6:8). Salvation includes reconciliation and access.

24c–25 The *But* in *But in the LORD* (25) should be omitted. As with verses 14–17, this section ends with two juxtaposed statements without a connecting particle: 'All who incensed themselves against him will reap shame [*cf.* verse 16]; in the Lord all the seed of Israel will be righteous and will praise [*cf.* verse 17]'. The reflexive 'incensed themselves' indicates that their attachment to idolatry (16, 20) was not an unfortunate accident of birth or a mere conformism but a decisive commitment involving animosity towards any counter-claim. A merely national significance of *Israel* would make nonsense of the whole argument of this passage. As in verse 17, the honoured name now casts its mantle over a world-wide confessional community (see Westermann above, on verse 23). The words *descendants/seed of* indicate reality and co-equality of membership and match the 'born there' of Psalm 87:4–6 <5–7>. Turning to the Lord (22) confers birthright (*cf.* Gal. 3:7, 29). Compare *righteous* (Skinner, 'enjoy righteousness') with *righteousness* in verse 24. Objectively, along with the gift of righteousness came the strength to live accordingly (24); subjectively, the enjoyment of righteousness (25) issues in responsive 'praise'.

4. Rebellious people: the inflexible Lord (46:1–13)

The chronology of Isaiah's 'story' develops. Babylon (*cf.* 43:14) is now in imminent dan-

yē'āmēr ('of me it shall be said') and the LXX points to *lē'mōr* ('saying'). BHS adopts the LXX while North says that it 'hardly inspires confidence'.

ger (1), with its gods being evacuated. Israel too has changed—for the worse: the complaints of 45:9–14 have become rebellion (8). The people are stubborn and far from righteousness (12). But while the Lord is inflexible regarding what he has determined to do (10–11), he is also inflexible in his commitment to his people (3–4).

This is a vigorous poem in five sections, based mainly on an idiom of contrast:

- A The burdening gods (1–2)
- B The burden-bearing God (3–4)
- C The made gods, burdens without saving power (5–7)
- D The making God (8–11)
- E The saving God (12–13)

A and B are joined by a common vocabulary (carry, rescue; ‘burdensome’ (1c) and ‘upheld’ (3c) are the same word) and a contrasting theology. B and C have words in common: ‘carried’ (3d) and ‘lift’ (7a) are the same word, and so are ‘sustain’ (4b) and ‘carry’ (7a); to make occurs in verses 4c and 6c. Their main link, however, is thematic. The description of the carrying God (3–4) leads to the question (5a) to whom such a God could be likened. C speaks of making a god (‘ēl) and D of a God (‘ēl) who does (‘makes’) what he pleases (6c, 10d). Thematically, C and D are joined by the command to ‘Remember this’ (8a), which arises from verses 5–7. The association between E and both B and C rounds the poem off. ‘Listen to me’ occurs in 3ab and 12ab, and there is also the contrast between the gods who cannot save (7e) and the God with a saving purpose (13cd).

The burdening gods (46:1–2)

Each verse opens with the same two verbs, arranged chiastically. Verse 1 deals with the fall of the gods as nuisances and burdens; verse 2 with the exposure of the gods as unhelping and helpless.

1 *Bel* (Marduk) was the city-god of Babylon and head of the Babylonian pantheon. *Nebo* (Bel’s son) was the city-god of Borsippa near Babylon and the god of writing and wisdom. His image was brought annually to Babylon to accompany his father in the New Year procession and to write on the Tables of Destiny the fates decreed by the gods for the coming year. *Nebo* appears in names like Nebuchadnezzar and Nabonidus, showing the special honour he had in the royal house. The patronage of such gods is useless to either king or city; those who wrote the fate of the city are themselves victims of its

fate! In 703, when Sennacherib attacked Babylon, Merodach-Baladan organized just such an evacuation of gods as this.²⁸ Thus, against the background of his own time Isaiah imaginatively pictures the future. We do not know if the gods were evacuated before Cyrus, but Isaiah's purpose is not to describe but to expose. Cyrus's avowal of allegiance to Marduk after he captured Babylon²⁹ is as tongue-in-cheek as his devotion to the Lord in Ezra 1:2. It is the calculated pragmatism of a soldier turned politician, to whom religion was no more than another lever to power (like the sin of Jeroboam; 1 Ki. 12:25ff.).

2 *Bow* is a perfect, *stoop* is a participle. Isaiah adopts the role of a commentator: 'Bel has collapsed, Nebo is (even now) crumpling'. *Their idols are borne by*/'have become for ...', 'have passed into the possession of' *beasts of burden* (*cf.* 2:20). *Their images that are carried*/'your carried things' (in the religious processions) *are burdensome*/'are loaded up' ($\sqrt{\text{āmas}}$; *cf.* verse 3c). No more pomp now, just 'god-parcels'! *Weary* is a telling touch! A venerable image is impressive, even frightening,³⁰ but there is not much mystique left when even pack animals weary of them! Since Bel and Nebo were patron gods, the *burden* could be their responsibility for the royal house and city, a burden which when the crisis came they were found unable to discharge. But more probably *burden* is the idol itself loaded on the beasts. Beyond the image there is no invisible god, therefore nothing to intervene to rescue the sacred object (*cf.* Jdg. 6:30–31).

The burden-bearing God (46:3–4)

3 Isaiah is envisaging those who survive through the captivity into the time of Cyrus. *Whom I have upheld* is 'who have been loaded [on to me]'. In verse 1 the gods were 'loaded up' on the beasts, who groaned under their weight; here the people are loaded on their God, who accepts the burden. *Have carried* is 'have been carried'.

²⁸ E. Schrader, *The Cuneiform Inscriptions and the Old Testament* (Williams and Norgate, 1885), vol. 2, p. 36.

²⁹ The Cyrus Cylinder, a propagandist document written against the background of the alienation of the priests of Marduk by Nabonidus (the last Babylonian emperor), records Cyrus as Marduk's agent of vengeance. To punish Nabonidus, Marduk 'scanned: ... all the countries ... for a righteous ruler ... pronounced the name of Cyrus ... ruler of the world'. But unlike the Lord, Marduk kept all this to himself until after the event!

³⁰ Cf. the Easter Island statues, see T. Heyerdahl, *Aku Aku* (Penguin, 1960).

4 Except in the case of *I will rescue*, *I* is emphatic ('I will myself ...') throughout this verse. The NIV has altered the order of the MT; it is (lit.) 'Even to old age I am he, and to grey hair I will myself bear'. On *I am he* see 41:4. If there is a difference between *sustain*/'bear a load, shoulder' ($\sqrt{sābāl}$) and *carry* ($\sqrt{nāsā}$), then the former means to submit to carrying and the latter to take up a load (cf. 53:11–12). *Made* refers here to the origin of the nation in the hand of God (cf. 43:7; 44:2) and this constantly sounds the note of comfort. The people's existence depends on the Lord, therefore they will remain unless he changes his mind, but 'he is the same'. *I will rescue* is a co-ordinate verb with *sustain* ('shoulder'), as if to say that rescuing is not a separate effort or act but part of the service automatically rendered by the burden-bearing God.

The made gods: burdens without saving power (46:5–7)

5 *Compare* would be used of the facial resemblance of a child to a parent and therefore points to 'general likeness'. The verb *count me equal* means 'to be level, on level terms with' and hence indicates exact equality of status, capacity etc. *Compare* is the word used of drawing out similarities between things (using one thing as a 'parable' of another because of a common element in each). The point is, therefore, is the Lord broadly similar to any other god? Is there another who is precisely his equal? Has he even anything in common with the so-called gods?

6 *Pour out gold* and *hire a goldsmith* refer to the origin of the 'gods' in human resources and skills. Ironically 'ēl, the most transcendent of the god words, is used with the verb 'to make'! *Worship* is preceded by the particle of irony 'ap: 'they bow and—did you ever—bring themselves down in worship!'

7 *Though one cries* is another verb prefaced with 'ap. The stress, therefore, falls not on the fact that prayer goes unanswered but on the inherent absurdity of even thinking to pray to a 'thing' that needs to be picked up, carried, set down etc.

The making God (46:8–11)

This proves to be Isaiah's final appeal to Israel to accept the Lord's will, to believe what he says and trust what he does, though even as he make his appeal he senses that it is falling on deaf ears (12). He calls them to take a theological view of history, understanding present and future in the light of the past, recognizing the continuity of action of the one God whose 'love in time past forbids me to think he'll leave me at last'.³¹

8 On *Remember this* cf. 44:21. It is hard for Isaiah's people to accept a form of deliver-

ance which does not solve the basic problem of national independence and a Davidic restoration (*cf.* 45:9ff.). Isaiah's appeal is that they should exercise their minds rather on the Lord's record of bearing and caring. Even though they cannot understand what he is doing in the Cyrus-plan, they know him! Meanings like 'to be firm' ('and stand firm') or 'to be obedient' have been suggested for *fix it in mind* ($\sqrt{\text{āšaš}}$). The oldest interpretation, 'to act like men, act rationally', relates the verb to the noun *'iš* ('a man'). Simon would emend³² to mean 'and confess your guilt', which would suit the present emphasis on rebellion and stubbornness (12).

9 *The former things* are the Lord's dealings with his people all through their history. The validity of this appeal comes in lines b and c, beginning with 'For'. The God who so acted is still the same. The first *God* ('*ēl*) is God in transcendent glory and power, and the second ('*elōhîm*) is God in the fulness of the divine attributes. He is the only God (*there is no other*) and he is unique (*there is none like him*).

10 *Make known, say and summon* (11) are all participles ('making known' etc.), indicating continuity in history, with past, present and future respectively proceeding from the one, unique God. He dictates the purpose within history (*end* is 'outcome'). *Ancient times* is better 'beforehand'. He dictates what will happen (*still to come* is 'things which have not been done'). He is sovereign, his *purpose/plan/counsel* is inalterable and is the product not of whim but of his pleasurable will (*all that I please*). In a word, he is a God who is God.

11 He does not play down what most troubles his people. Cyrus will come as *a bird of prey*, a ruthless conqueror, and their worst fears will be realized. There will be a return without freedom or sovereignty. Isaiah calls his hearers to a realistic faith, a faith which looks facts in the face and still trusts (*cf.* Rom. 4:19–20). *Said, bring about* and *do* are each prefaced by '*ap*' in its emphatic and cumulative sense: 'Indeed I have said; certainly I will bring ... for sure I will do'. *Planned* is 'fashioned, moulded', pointing to the Lord as the potter of history.

The saving God (46:12–13)

Isaiah's accusations against Israel mount in directness and intensity (and will climax in

³¹ John Newton's hymn, 'Begone, unbelief'.

³² From *w^ehit'aššemû*.

chapter 48). *Stubborn-hearted* means rigid in mind, intractable in emotions and unbidable in will. On *heart* see 9:9 <8>. They are far from righteousness, from conformity to the will, character and purposes of the Lord, and he will implement his *righteousness*, all that accords with his will, character and purposes, everything that is ‘right with God’. This is the choice: will they hold to their own sense of what is ‘right’ or bow to his? To take the latter course is an act of faith in him, his promises and his ceaselessly good purpose for his own people. In essence, this is the issue of justification by faith. When Isaiah returns to diagnose their state further (48:1ff.), they will have lost all right to be called Israel. As ever, justification by faith is the point at which the people of God stand or fall. On *salvation* see 25:9; and on *splendour/beauty* see 4:2. The idolater makes his god in his own image/beauty (44:13); Israel’s true destiny is to be made in the image of the Lord.

5. The triumph of Cyrus (47:1–48:22)

We now come to the fulfilment of what the Lord had in mind for Cyrus. This section matches the two parts of 44:24–45:8 and is chiastically arranged. The irresistible conqueror of 45:1–8 conquers Babylon (47:1–15); the builder of Zion (44:24–28) releases the captives (48:1–22).

a. Pride before a fall: the doom of Babylon (47:1–15)

Babylon’s pride showed itself in heartless exploitation (6b), disregard of the moral dimension (7), dismissal of the possibility of retribution (10), the assumption of tenure of life’s good as a natural right (8) and a comfortable attitude towards religion (14). For these things the Lord ‘visits’ them with vengeance.

In its vigour and structure, this poem resembles 46:1–13. It falls into six stanzas of broadly equal length, arranged thematically in pairs:

- A The degradation of Babylon (1–7)
 - a¹ Divine vengeance applied (1–4)
 - a² Divine vengeance explained (5–7)
- B Diagnosis: pride (8–11)
 - b¹ Superior to all (8–9)
 - b² Answerable to none (10–11)
- C The religion that failed (12–15)

c¹ Devotion without salvation (12–13)

c² Babylon deserted (14–15)

a¹ and a² are linked by the command to *sit* (1c, 5a), by the identical words *no more will you be called* (1e, 5c), but most significantly by the Lord speaking in the first person (3cd, 6a–c): the word of vengeance and its explanation. Self-concerned (1f), heartless (6d–f) arrogance (7ab) emerges as the characteristic of Babylon. b¹ and b² pick up the self-testimony of verse 7ab and elaborate it into the theme of these two stanzas that Babylon's superiority guarantees immunity from life's common sorrows (8b–e) and from being called to account (10b). They are also linked by the verb 'will not know' (8f, *suffer*) and the ironical echo, *you will not know* (11b) and by *overtake/come upon* (9a) and *come upon* (11a). The link between these middle stanzas and the concluding pair is provided by *your many sorceries* (9e, 12b) and *you cannot/will not be able* (11d) and 'be able' (*succeed/to profit*, 12d). Stanzas c¹ and c² have the single theme of false religion and its failure, with the significant verbal link of *which you have laboured at since your childhood* (12c, 15bc).

The degradation of Babylon (47:1–7)

Divine vengeance applied (47:1–4)

These verses assert two principles which lie at the heart of divine providential government of the world: retribution (3cd) and the centrality of the people of God (4). To its loss, Babylon flouted both (respectively, verses 7, 8–11 and verse 6).

1 In status Babylon is humbled (*sit in the dust*), deprived of former glory (*without a throne*) and of repute (*no more called*). *Dust* (see 4:1) is a symbol of humiliation and mourning. *Tender and delicate/‘dainty’* suggests what is easily hurt and needs shielding against life's roughnesses.

2–3 In experience too Babylon suffers change, from the cosseted woman (1–2) to a slave (taking *millstones* and grinding *flour*), a captive bound for exile (*wade through*) and a violated girl (*nakedness will be exposed*). Captives were customarily naked or virtually so. *Wade through/‘cross’* is a picture of leaving for exile (43:2). In the vocabulary of vengeance the word *nāqām* (here *vengeance*; cf. 1:24) expresses equivalence between offence and punishment. In the present sentence the word is emphatic: what the Lord does is exactly appropriate to the situation. *Spare* means ‘meet’ (1 Sa. 10:5), ‘touch’ (Jos. 16:7), ‘attack’ (1 Ki. 2:32) and ‘intercede’ (Gn. 23:8). Only *Isaiah 64:5 <4>*, ‘come to the

help of' (lit. 'to meet with favour' or simply 'to favour'), is suited to the present passage. A vowel change³³ would give, 'I will not allow myself to be entreated'. Either way, as the Lord sees it, the situation is one of 'no quarter'. The actual outworking, however, indicates well how the Lord is not to be constrained within human parameters. Cyrus took Babylon effortlessly, and by morning every citizen of the empire was not a Babylonian but a Persian. Thus the old order vanished under the just (but merciful) hand of God.

4 This verse is an interjection noting that the fall of Babylon was for the sake of Israel ([14:1–2](#)). The verse makes three points. First, the Lord's right to act for Israel: he is *Redeemer* (*gō'ēl*), *Next-of-kin* (cf. [35:9–10](#)). [Isaiah 63:4](#) links the ideas of vengeance (*nāqām*) and redemption (*gē'ullīm*).³⁴ Secondly, the Lord is by nature suited to perform next-of-kin functions, for his name is that of the one who redeemed his people ([Ex. 6:6](#); $\sqrt{gā'al}$). Here *LORD* (*yahweh*) is enhanced by *Almighty*/‘of hosts’ (see [1:9](#)), the embodiment of every possible potentiality and power. Thirdly, his authority to act in vengeance arises from his character as *the Holy One*, and to act on Israel’s behalf from the fact that he is *the Holy One of Israel*.³⁵

Divine vengeance explained (47:5–7)

The intervention of ‘the Holy One of Israel’ in vengeance on Babylon is now justified by reference to Babylon’s treatment of Israel. As noted above, this section has a link with the following two sections ([8–9](#), [10–11](#)) in that each contains a testimony from Babylon. The first testimony ([7](#)) is that Babylon has the axiomatic right to rule in perpetuity.

³³ From '*eῆga*' to '*eppāḡā*' (so North and Simon). Watts notes that the ancient ‘versions, like modern translators, have not been able to resist the temptation to translate an opaque word with a meaning gained from the context’. He translates ‘do not meet a human’ and explains ‘only magic and sorcery’, but he allows that ‘meet in mercy’ is possible.

³⁴ See [Nu. 35:12](#). The ancient institution of the ‘avenger’ (*gō'ēl*) rested on the principle of exact requital. The institution of cities of refuge was designed to protect this principle from abuse.

³⁵ Verse [4](#) is simply juxtaposed with verse [3](#), and Isaiah’s intention is to set side-by-side the thoughts of exact vengeance and the styles and titles of the avenging God. *BHS*, however, follows the [LXX](#) in reading ‘says’, and Whybray observes that the concluding previous word (*'ādām*) may have occasioned a haplography (writing one word instead of two similar words) and the omission of *'āmar* (‘says’).

5 Babylon is about to lose authority (*silence*, as compared with formerly dictating the rules), liberty (the *darkness* of captivity and imprisonment, cf. 42:7) and position (*no more ... queen*/‘mistress’).

6 On *I was angry* cf. 10:5–15. The Lord had his purposes but Babylonian action, while formally within the will of God, was an offence to him. It is not that events got out of divine control or that Jerusalem suffered more than was consistent with absolute divine justice. The sin lies in the assumptions behind Babylonian action and the manner of their accomplishment: its pitilessness (*no mercy*, 6d), indiscriminateness (*even on the aged*, 6e), arrogance (*for ever ... queen*, 7ab) and absence of moral sense (*consider ... reflect*, 7cd). *Mercy* (*rah̄mîm*) is the emotion of compassion (14:1). It is typical of Old Testament ethics to have a special concern for those who, for whatever reason, are helpless, e.g. *the aged* (cf. Dt. 10:19; Ps. 68:5 <6>). Furthermore, the Old Testament makes no room for the common assumption that in time of war ‘ordinary’ moral considerations can be put in cold storage for the duration, or that national advantage justifies what would be reprehensible or criminal if done by a private individual.

7 Babylon assumed a right to tenure (*continue*), authority (*queen*/‘mistress’) and immunity from consequences (*what might happen*)—ever the ‘blind spots’ of those at the top. To *consider*/‘lay upon your heart’ means to take a thoughtful view of conduct; *to reflect on what might happen*/‘its outcome’ is to take a morally responsible view of conduct. But crimes against humanity never go unrecorded in heaven, or unpunished (cf. Am. 1:3–2:3).

Diagnosis: pride (47:8–11)

Superior to all (47:8–9)

Now then makes a logical link between verses 5–7 and 8–9. Babylon had lived as if there were no moral consequences of conduct (7cd) but, as we now learn, there are.

8 The testimony here (8cd) is a private matter (*to yourself*/‘in your heart’): in effect, no-one else matters (*I am*) and there is no-one to challenge me (*none besides me*). From this inner attitude arose an assumption of security (8b) and immunity (8f). Uppermost in *you wanton creature* (North, ‘you pampered jade’)³⁶ is the thought of self-indulgence. *To be*/‘live in’ *a widow*/‘widowhood’ was to be without provision, protection and status;

³⁶ North, *Second Isaiah, ad loc.*

to suffer the loss of children was to be without future security ([Ps. 127:5](#)) and hope. *Suffer* is ‘and I will not know’. This rendering must be retained to effect the link with *you will not know* in verse [11b](#).

9 *In a moment* Babylon will lose both present and future. *Overtake you*/‘come to you’ matches ‘come’ in line d (where it is a perfect of certainty, ‘are bound to come’) and verse [11a](#). The future which Babylon ignored ([7d](#)) brings what Babylon dismissed. *In spite of your many sorceries* is a reference to religious practice and prepares for verses [12–13](#). On *sorceries* and *spells* see verse [12](#).

Answerable to none ([47:10–11](#))

Babylon chose to assume that there was no moral authority to whom it would be answerable; a highly optimistic and wholly erroneous view!

10 The section opens with the conjunction used in its explicatory sense, ‘that is’/‘you see ...’. In verse [8](#) Babylon was confident of security, notwithstanding self-indulgence; here, the confidence is notwithstanding *wickedness* (a general word for ‘bad’ behaviour). *Trusted* is used in its absolute sense, ‘remained serenely confident’. *In* is either ‘while continuing in’ or ‘in spite of’. *Your wisdom* is your own assessment of things, and *knowledge* is your own comprehension of all there is to know. They did not think it significant to give God a place in this knowledge ([Rom. 1:28](#)). When, therefore, the third testimony is made, *I am, and there is none besides me*, it now specifically means ‘there is no divine moral governor of the world’. In verse [8](#) it meant, ‘I do not have to bother about other people’; here, ‘I do not have to bother with God’.

11 *Disaster* is the same word which appeared as *wickedness* in verse [10a](#)! They embraced ‘evil’ and ‘evil’ is what they will get. This illustrates the exact requital of verse [3c](#). There is no certainty about the translation *not know how to conjure it away*, which ([KB](#)) arises from an Akkadian cognate meaning ‘sorcerer’. As the [MT](#) stands it means ‘you will not know its dawn’, i.e. the moment when the evil day breaks, and this makes good sense. *You cannot ward off with a ransom* ($\sqrt{kāpar}$) is ‘you will not be able for its ransom-price’; it cannot be bought off ([6:7](#)). *Cannot foresee* is ‘do not know’, i.e. have no previous experience of. In turn, therefore, the disaster is unheralded, inescapable and unprecedented.

The religion that failed ([47:12–15](#))

Devotion without salvation (47:12–13)

This and the concluding section (14–15) are concerned with Babylon's religion and its officiants. Here, the question is, does it perform religion's functions of providing strength in a crisis (12) and clear forewarnings (13)?

12 *Spells* (*ḥ^aḇārîm*, ‘associations’, ‘bindings’) combines the sense of association with supernatural powers and thus the controlling or binding of the future. *Sorceries* (*k^ešāpîm*) are the actual incantations used. *Succeed* is ‘be able to profit’. The Lord has already said (11d) that they will not be equipped for the coming disaster. Isaiah now makes it a test of whose word will prevail, the Lord’s or the incantation directed to the gods of Babylon. *Cause terror*, i.e. so as after all to dispel the threat.

13 *All the counsel* is ‘the abundance of your counsel’ and possibly contains a hint of the conflicting ideologies at the heart of polytheism. *Has only worn you out*/‘you have wearied yourself’ matches *laboured since childhood* (12c, 15bc). Commitment, discipline and effort are a true part of religion, but when allied to the worthless they are only a weariness. *Astrologers*/‘those who divide the heavens’ refers to ‘the Babylonian division of the heavens into segments in order to study the movement of the heavenly bodies across the sky and from these to predict earthly events’ (Whybray). In verse 12 they tried to control the future, now they want to know it in advance. To the contrary, the Lord of history promises to *save* his people through the events of history not *from* them (46:13).

Babylon deserted (47:14–15)

Continuing from the preceding section, verse 14 answers verse 12: false religion, far from strengthening its devotees against the future, only adds fuel to the fire. Verse 15 matches verse 13: far from saving others, its practitioners are only concerned to save their own skins.

14 *Surely* is ‘Behold’. On *stubble* see 5:24. *Save* is a different verb from the previous verse and means, ‘they cannot deliver their soul’, just like their gods (cf. 46:2c). *Here are no coals ... here is no fire* is either a reference to the coming *flame* of divine judgment or a diagnosis of false religion, which may offer the comfort of a fire but in the end is a furnace of destruction. The latter meaning leads better into *That is all they can do for you* (15). *Trafficked* is rather, ‘trafficking with you’. Babylon *laboured* at its religion (12), but the religious practitioners were making a trade out of Babylon.³⁷ Consequently, when the bottom dropped out of their market each ‘wanders off, making his exit’, or ‘goes his

own random way' (North),³⁸ i.e. takes whatever route he can out of the danger. But in this religion 'there is no-one to save you' (the verb in verse 13d). On *save* ($\sqrt{yāšā}$ in verses 13–15, $\sqrt{nāṣal}$ in verse 14) see 25:9.

b. A problem solved, a problem raised (48:1–22)

The other side of the task of Cyrus now comes to the fore. Babylon has fallen; the captives of Babylon must be liberated and sent home.

The most striking feature of this chapter is the severity of its diagnosis of Israel: *stubborn* (4a), *unsubmissive* (4b), *intractable* (4c), *deaf to the Lord's word* and preferring false gods (5–7), *treacherous* and *rebellious* (8), having thrown away peace through disobedience (18). Above all, they can no longer be called Israel or claim allegiance to the Lord with truth or credibility (1) and in consequence return home rejoicing in deliverance (20) but *wicked* and without *peace* (22). Would Isaiah have spoken in this way? Having reached the end of a section that began at 40:1, we ought rather to ask could he have spoken in any other way? Chapter 48 is the inevitable climax of a rising tide of awareness of Israel's sin and need: the morose self-pity of 40:27ff., Israel justly in bondage for disobedience but insensitive to the moral issues involved (42:18–25), then culpably blind and deaf (43:8) and weary of the Lord and careless of the meaning of true religion (43:22–24). They were stung by national pride into questioning the Cyrus-plan and so rooted in opposition that warning (45:9–13), assurance (45:14–25) and appeal (46:1–13) were all in vain. They argued the toss with God beyond all possibility and propriety (45:9ff.) and were rebellious (46:8), stubborn (46:12) and far from righteousness (46:12). All this is more diffuse, less sustained than in chapter 48 but not lesser in weight and implication. Chapter 48 stands out from chapters 40–47 not because it is alien but because it is climactic.³⁹

³⁷ G. R. Driver ('Linguistic and textual problems: Isaiah xl–lxxvi', *JTS*, 36 [1935], 400) suggests that *sōḥēr* is cognate to Akkadian *šāhiru*, 'enchanter'. Whybray adopts this.

³⁸ North, *Second Isaiah*, p. 173.

³⁹ Duhm seems to have originated the view that the terms of chapter 48 are unsuited to the message of a 'prophet of comfort', and he excised the offending verses as secondary. This remains the view of many, though less on the ground of the 'prophet of comfort' argument and more because of apparently abrupt changes of mood. Not all follow this course. Muilenburg would excise only

The chapter falls into two parallel sections, a unified treatment of the interlocking themes of human recalcitrance and divine perseverance.

Past perseverance ([1–11](#)) Future perseverance ([12–22](#))

A¹ Address: Israel described A² Address: the Lord described

B¹ The former things ([3–6b](#)) B² The Cyrus-plan confirmed ([14–15](#))

C¹ The new things ([6c–7](#)) C² The servant ([16](#))

D¹ The Lord's motives ([8–11](#)) D² The Lord's acts ([17–22](#))

Past perseverance ([48:1–11](#))

Bracketed by references to the Lord's *name* ([2c](#), [9a](#)), this section opens by levelling charges against Israel ([1–2](#)), develops those charges in the familiar contexts of former ([3–6b](#)) and new ([6c–7](#)) things, and finally reveals the secret behind all divine dealings with Israel ([8–11](#)).

Israel described ([48:1–2](#))

The governing words in these verses are *not in truth or*/‘and not’ in *righteousness*. There is no *but* to begin with; the words are an abrupt interjection. The people may register a claim to status, pedigree (*from the line*/‘waters’, *i.e.* as a river from its source), allegiance (*take oaths*/‘swear loyalty to’; [65:16](#); [Dt. 6:13](#); [10:20](#)), and to a living relationship with the Lord (*invoke the God of Israel*/‘keep the God of Israel in remembrance’).⁴⁰ Furthermore (verse [2](#), ‘even though they call ...’),⁴¹ they may claim citizenship of Zion and ‘lean

verse [22](#) and is impressed by the unity of the rest of the chapter, noting how a consistent vocabulary (‘hear, call, speak, declare, tell’, for example) binds the content together. Smart finds Duham’s position a ‘perfect illustration of how a false assumption can lead the interpretation astray’, *i.e.* the assumption that ‘comfort’ is the determining factor. North concurs, urging that the prophet is no mere ‘mild enthusiast’. It is, of course, essential to ask (and for those who would excise verses to explain) why a late editor should ever have inserted such material if it is so plainly misplaced.

⁴⁰ They are to keep him in remembrance as his people’s sufficient help ([Ps. 20:7<8](#)) and for his past deeds ([Ps. 71:11<12](#); cf. [Ex. 20:24](#)).

[niphal of $\sqrt{sāmak}$; 36:6] on the God ...’ but there is no genuineness (*truth*) in the claim, nor does it correspond to the divine norm in such matters (*righteousness*). They have forfeited the name and membership of Israel, their relationship with God. ‘They have actually forfeited the right to claim the unique relation to him of a covenant people ... they cannot in truth call themselves Israel’.⁴²

1 *Jacob* ... *Israel* ... *Judah* are respectively, the nation, the covenant people and the particular audience addressed. Only a prophet from Judah would speak like this and go on to place such an emphasis on *the holy city* (2). Details like this agree ill with the Deutero-Isaiah hypothesis. On *line*/‘waters’ see [Deuteronomy 33:28](#); [Psalm 68:26](#) < 27> .⁴³

2 The very full title of the Lord comes as a surprise, but since the *name* of the Lord (9a) forms an inclusio to the first half of the poem it cannot be here without purpose. It serves to raise a question: the actual people of Jacob/Israel have come to a total loss, but can that be the end of the story? After all, here is an *Almighty* (‘of hosts’; 1:9) God, he is *the LORD* whose name is synonymous with rescuing these very people from a situation of total loss ([Ex. 3:7–15](#); [6:6–7](#)), and he is *the God of Israel*, the God who chose this people and committed himself to them in covenant. So what will the end of the story be? This prepares the way for verses 9–11, the persevering God who never gives up.

The former things (48:3–6b)

Isaiah has made recurring use of ‘the former things’ and ‘the new things’. His use of these terms is flexible: ‘former things’ can be the general past (41:22), events linked with the coming conqueror (42:9) or the exodus (43:9, 18). ‘New things’ are the coming ministry of the servant (42:9) and the return from Babylon (43:19). In each case the context must decide. Here, *former things* must be events favourable to Israel, for otherwise they would not be attributed in a congratulatory way to an idol (5). This would allow predicted events like the exodus but rule out predicted events like the fall of Jerusalem. If

⁴¹ Simon translates, ‘But it is not in truth or right that they call themselves ...’. This is possible but not probable.

⁴² Smart, p. 144.

⁴³ Watts follows the unnecessary (and somewhat banal) course of emending *mimmē* (‘from the waters of’) to *mimm̄ē* (‘from the loins of’).

the rise of Cyrus is intended, it must include the release of the captives for, up to that point, there was nothing necessarily beneficial in the advent of an even greater overlord. Thus to class the *former things* as the rise of Cyrus and the *new things* as the return (as Skinner does)⁴⁴ is impermissible. Some see the *new things* as the fall of Babylon and the return (e.g. Whybray),⁴⁵ but this is difficult especially for the Deutero-Isaiah hypothesis. Both Jeremiah and Ezekiel had predicted the return, so how could it be called a new thing, unheard of before (6cd)? The structure of the poem (see above) proposes its own interpretation: the *former things* are the Cyrus-plan (the fall of Babylon and the release of the captives), the *new things* are the servant events (the coming of the Spirit-endowed one).

Isaiah has used the argument from prediction and fulfilment to demonstrate the sole deity of the Lord as against claimant gods. The argument here is that the Lord himself designed the procedure of undated prediction coupled with sudden fulfilment in order to bring his people to full conviction and to wean their hearts from their idols. There is nothing in these verses to suggest (as some imply) that this whole process stretched out over a long period. No time-factor is built into the argument; it is simply said that the fulfilment (whether it followed the prediction closely or after a long delay) came with unpredictable suddenness. And this was so lest, foreseeing that the fulfilment was about to happen, someone might register a claim on behalf of an idol.

3 *Foretold* is ‘declared’. On *long ago* (*mē’āz*) see on 44:8. *My mouth announced them* is ‘and from my mouth they went forth’ (see 45:23). *Known* is ‘heard’.

4 *Stubborn* (*qāšeh*) means ‘brusque’ (1 Sa. 20:10) or ‘cantankerous’ (1 Sa. 25:3), i.e. temperamentally difficult. The *neck of iron* is one incapable of bowing in submission, indicating self-assurance; a *forehead of bronze* indicates an opinionated person with a set mind.

5 Whybray alleges a contradiction here with 43:12, understanding that verse as ‘the accepted fact that no other god had played a significant role in Israel’. But 43:12 is not dealing in ‘accepted facts’; rather it is an attempt to press unwilling Israel to acknowledge only one God at work at the outset of their history. But Israel did not so testify then and here is quick to boast alternative claims. *Idols* (which should be singular) signifies

⁴⁴ Skinner, pp. 79–80.

⁴⁵ Whybray, pp. 128–129.

something shaped (*cf.* the verb in **Jb. 10:8**),⁴⁶ *wooden image* something carved and *metal god* something cast (*god* is an interpretative addition).

6ab *Heard* and *look* are singular; *admit*/‘declare’ is plural. The plural is an appeal for witnesses; the singulars express the solidarity of national experience. To all the other charges with which this chapter resonates Isaiah adds that of mental blindness, an unreadiness of the mind to be convinced.

The new things (48:6c–7)

The argument changes from the evidential value of history to the revelation of new truth. In verse **6ab** the point at issue was ‘hearing’ (the prediction) and ‘looking at’ (the fulfilment). Now all the verbs are those of hearing and knowing (*I will tell*/‘I will make you hear’). Therefore, in verse **7a** *created* is not events such as only God can effectuate but truth such as only he can tell. He desires his people to receive this truth in confident faith, resting on the word which he has spoken, simply because it is his word.

6cd *From now on* here is better, ‘Just now’. *I will tell* is ‘I will make you hear’. On *new things* see the note above on verses **3–7**. *Hidden*/‘things kept in reserve’ refers to the timing not the content of revelation.

7 *Created* (*bārā*; **4:5**) is used of things so great or so novel that they demand God as their agent. Yes is ‘Behold’. The charge behind *I knew of them* is not of attributing to an idol the capacity to have revealed this truth but of arrogant self-opinionation, as if truth which only God could ‘create’ were a commonplace fact in the human mind.

The Lord’s motives (48:8–11)

Israel does not have the knowledge claimed (**8a**) nor has it ever possessed an open ear to divine truth (**8b**). The pretence at knowledge is evidence of treacherousness (**8c**) and the closed ear evidence of an innately (from birth) rebellious nature (**8d**). What then? Will the just judgment fall? They are outside the sphere of salvation (**1–2**) and must they perish? No, for there is another factor in the situation. For reasons within his own nature (*for my name’s sake*, **9a**) *wrath* is restrained, chastisement is within bounds (**10a**), the divine choice is still in force (**10b**); for in the Lord’s heart (*for my own sake*, **11a**) is a commitment to his own reputation (**11bc**).

⁴⁶ The noun ‘ōšeb occurs only here. The customary form is ‘āšāb (**10:11**; **46:1**), but the form is not in itself suspicious.

8 The three statements *heard*, *understood* and *been open* are each prefaced by *gam*, a particle of addition ('also') which is frequently used, as here, to add emphasis. Since the three facts contrast with what the Lord wanted, we may translate 'Ah but' before each verb. *Has not been open* is 'did not open'. This translation of the piel of $\sqrt{pātāh}$ is justified by Song of Solomon 7:12 <13>. The gravamen of the accusation is, then, imperviousness to revealed truth. The Lord spoke but there was no hearing, no mental response leading to knowing (*understood*/‘known’), no fundamental openness to the word of the Lord. This is summed up in the accusation of ‘treachery’. $\sqrt{bāgād}$ means to renege on a known obligation (1 Sa. 14:33), to prove to be a disappointment (Jb. 6:14), to go back on one’s word (Is. 33:1), and is used of family disloyalty (Je. 12:6) and spiritual harlotry (Ho. 5:7). The accusation that this wilfulness (*rebel* is a participle, ‘rebelling one’; cf. 1:2) was *from birth*, was an original sin rather than an acquired attitude, raises a question: If the Lord was thus aware of what he had chosen, might he not now exert his almighty power to persevere until his purposes are fulfilled rather than visit Israel with well-deserved wrath?

9 This verse reveals that what we dare only moot as a possibility is actually a logic within the divine nature. His *name* (the summary statement of what he has revealed about himself) compels him to ‘keep my temper’ (the subjective side of divine forbearance, 9a), and his *praise* (the repute he would wish for himself) makes him *hold it back from you* (the objective side of forbearance, 9b). To be ‘cut off’ (i.e. death) is the just reward of sin.

10 This verse thus arises from (and verse 11 leads into) the truth that divine forbearance is dictated by motives within the divine nature. A process that could only have ended in Israel’s death has been curtailed; *silver* is left in the crucible till the dross has gone (Mal. 3:3) but Israel’s silver is all dross (cf. 1:22). To refine Israel *as silver*/‘in the manner of silver’,⁴⁷ would leave nothing. Therefore, the Lord called a halt, saying ‘I have chosen you⁴⁸ in the furnace of affliction’. Classically, this is a reference to Egypt (Dt. 4:20; 1 Ki. 8:51), and if this is the case here then verse 10b explains 10a: the Lord does not go back on his ancestral choice (Rom. 11:29). But sometimes ‘to choose’ is used

⁴⁷ *b^ekesep*, as an extension of the *beth essentiae* construction, means ‘in a way characteristic of silver’. There is no need for the pedantry that alters the prefixed *b* to prefixed *k*.

⁴⁸ The NIV follows many in emending *b^ehartesep* (‘for myself like silver’).

to mean ‘to renew choice’ (e.g. 14:1; Zc. 1:17). The *furnace* would then be the Babylonian experience. In this case verse 10b simply follows 10a as the Lord cut short what would otherwise have been the end of the ‘Israel experiment’. Either way the truth of divine irrevocable choice shines out.

11 *For my own sake* (cf. verse 9), i.e. for reasons valid within the divine nature. *I do this* is better, reflecting the absolute use of the verb, ‘I act’, i.e. not just in this case but as an established practice in all cases (cf. Ezk. 20:9, 14, 22). The initial ‘For’ should be reintroduced before *how can* (lit.) ‘for how shall/can it be disgraced/defiled?’ The NIV follows the first person verb found in Q^a (tolerative niphil); the RV italicizes ‘my name’, the *to emon nomon* of the LXX. Fortunately, the sense remains identical. The *another* would be Israel, if their sinfulness overcame his purposes of grace and glory; or the gods of Babylon, if they succeeded in keeping Israel captive and the nation ultimately drowned in the surrounding culture. Over both sin and Babylon the Lord must win the victory.

Future perseverance (48:12–22)

The renewed address (12; cf. verse 1) marks the opening of the second half of the poem, which is uniformly forward-looking. The call to *listen/hear* provides a marker for the first three sections (12, 14, 16). It is singular in verse 12 (the personified nation) and plural in verses 14, 16 (the community of persons). This variation springs from the original setting of these units. The linking idea now is the word of the Lord: controlling the universe (13c); controlling history (15a); and revealing his purposes (16b). Verse 17 has its own introduction, and the thought of *peace*, the peace they might have had (18) but do not have (22), unites the final section.

The Lord described (48:12–13)

In verse 1 Israel were called by name but without reality; here they are the Lord’s called ones. Their unfaithfulness does not nullify the faithfulness of God. The use of the same verb (‘to call’) means that verse 12 is not forgetful of verse 1. The changed emphasis, that Israel is not doomed to the consequences of their own failure but maintained in the status accorded by the Lord, takes account of what his name is (2), the implications of that name in his plans for Israel (9) and the unchanged reality of his choice (10). The call of God reappears in verse 13c (*when I summon/I but call ... and ...*) in all its irresistible

^aThe St Mark’s Isaiah Scroll from Qumran.

power. What is true of the heavens is true of Israel. The divine call cannot fail. *I am he* (41:4), i.e. changeless and self-consistent. As *first* God was not pressed by any external agency into what he initiated; as *last* he stands unchallenged by any force that may have tried to oppose; and he brings to triumphant conclusion what he started. At the start, there was his uninhibited freedom to do as he chose; at the end, the untarnished gold of his completed work. The *hand* of God initiates (13a), and the call of God sovereignly dictates the outcome (13cd).

The Cyrus-plan confirmed (48:14–15)

The Lord is different from all other gods in that he predicts and fulfils (14ab); his Cyrus-plan will succeed against Babylon (14c–e). The call of God is the governing factor in history (15ab), and he himself superintends those whom he calls, guaranteeing their success (15cd).

14 Which of the idols has foretold these things is (lit.) ‘Who among them declared these things?’, but the thrust of the preceding chapters indicates a reference to the idol-gods. Throughout the preceding chapter, this argument (the ability or inability to predict) was used to expose the unreality of the idol-gods and the true and only deity of the Lord. Sadly, here it is addressed to the Lord’s professing people (14a), seeking to give them a basis of faith to accept the Cyrus-plan as from the hand of their unique Lord. *The LORD’s chosen ally will carry out his purpose*/‘The Lord has loved him; he will do his pleasure’. Muilenburg suggests there is a theophoric name here, ‘The-Lord-loves-him will perform ...’.⁴⁹ The title is an interesting anticipation of the Cyrus Cylinder account that Marduk, angered by the Babylonian kings, ‘scoured all the lands for a friend ... He called Cyrus ... went at his side like a friend and comrade ...’.⁵⁰ But as regards prediction, all Marduk managed was to perceive the course of Cyrus’s campaigns and to alert Nabonidus to the fact that ‘at the beginning of the third year, Cyrus ... will capture Astyages, the king of the Umman-manda [?a Median confederacy] ...’; he says nothing about Babylon.⁵¹ But over the career of Cyrus, even from before its inception and through to the predicted fall of Babylon, a greater ‘friend’ presided. *His purpose* is ‘his

⁴⁹ The LXX does not have ‘The LORD’ and points to *’ōh^abî* (‘my friend’). Whybray adopts this.

⁵⁰ DOTT, p. 92.

⁵¹ DOTT, pp. 89f.

pleasure', the Lord's will to the Lord's delight (*cf.* 53:10). *His arm will be against the Babylonians* is 'and his arm the Chaldeans'. The laws of parallelism allow verbs, prepositions etc. in the first member of the parallel to extend their force to the second (hence 'and his arm is against the Chaldeans').⁵²

15 On *spoken* and *called* see the note on verses 12–16 above. Divine sovereignty is the same in the natural and the historical realms. *Succeed in his mission* is 'make his way prosper'.

The Servant (48:16)

The Lord speaks the initial word (16a) and is present to preside over its fulfilment (16b). *In secret* is 'under cover' (*cf.* 45:19). This is the explanation of the power resident in the word of God: it proceeds from him and he does not then leave it to its own devices but accompanies it personally. Many regard 16cd as an addition but, as North allows, 'there is no textual evidence' for this.⁵³ As a later insertion, it might presumably have been intended to validate the prophet as a true messenger of the Lord. Others (e.g. Simon) see it as a biographical note from Deutero-Isaiah affirming his credentials.⁵⁴ Westermann observes the correct clues when he notes the similarity with 61:1 and 'precisely the same sentiments' as 49:1–6. This makes the word an anticipatory interjection by the Servant of the Lord as the agent in the 'new things' of the matching verses 3–6b. That such an intervention should take us by surprise is no argument against it. It suits the verse as a whole in that it gives content to the otherwise undefined word of 16bc. The title *the Sovereign LORD* figures notably in the third Servant Song (50:4, 5, 7, 9)⁵⁵ and at 61:1; *with/and his Spirit* must mean 'endowed with', and of the nine times the endowment of the Spirit is mentioned in the Isaianic literature five relate to the Messiah;⁵⁶ and finally, something about the Servant is appropriate in a chapter which has dwelt so much on

⁵² For *z̄rō̄’ô* ('his arm') the LXX implies *zera‘* ('seed/descendants') with '... on Babylon and [on] the seed of the Chaldeans'. BHS, Simon etc. adopt this simplified text.

⁵³ North, *Second Isaiah*, p. 182.

⁵⁴ BHS would change *š̄lāḥanî w̄rû̄hô* ('has sent me and his Spirit') to *’ešlāḥennû l̄orhô* ('I send him on his way')—a further reference to Cyrus, and a notable exercise of linguistic imagination.

⁵⁵ The order of words puts 'the Lord God' first (in the emphatic position) as in 50:4, 5, 7, 9.

⁵⁶ 11:2; 30:1; 32:15; 42:1; 44:3; 48:16; 59:21; 61:1; 63:11.

Israel's sins (*cf.* the note on verse 11bc).

The Lord's acts (48:17–22)

- a¹ The fruit of disobedience: lost peace (17–19)
- b The end of the Babylonian captivity (20–21)
- a² The residual problem; no peace (22)

This is a fitting conclusion to a poem which has emphasized throughout Israel's sin and the Lord's perseverance. Thus, as they come to the end of the captivity the problem of liberation is solved through divine redemptive action, but the problem of sin remains. The fact that liberation (20–21) is enfolded within the two 'peace' sections shows that it arises from divine decision not from Israel's deserving (*cf.* verses 9–11). We note also that the sequence of oracles on Israel's double need began by dwelling on failure in respect of the Lord's law (42:21–24). The present passage (17–18) thus provides an inclusio. But it is also a bridge, for the unresolved sin problem prepares the way for the Servant to step back onto the stage (49:1–6) to announce that his work includes bringing Israel back to the Lord (49:6).

17 As *Redeemer* (*gō’ēl*) he identifies with their need of liberation and meets it, but as *Holy One* he cannot overlook their sin. *What is best for you* is 'you to profit'. The emphasis on the word of the Lord continues from verses 12–16 (see the introductory note) and matches the lament on the unopened ear in the corresponding verse 8. The Lord's teaching is directive for life as well as conceptual for the mind.

18 Obedience (18a) would have issued in *peace* (*cf.* 9:6 <5>), perpetual as a *river* (*nāhār*; 66:12), not a seasonal stream. *Your righteousness*/‘your right standing with God’ leads to an experience of power like that of the *waves*, the product of invisible forces at work.

19 *Descendants*/‘seed’ like numberless *grains of sand* is not just a symbol of vigour and prosperity but a sign of divine blessing (*cf.* Ps. 127:3–5) and, much more, the fulfilment of the Abrahamic promises (Gn. 15:5; 22:17): in other words, the full reality of covenant blessing. On *cut off* see verse 9. *Before me* refers to acceptance in the divine presence.

20 *Flee*, as well as its general use of running from, also expresses quick movement, ‘Get quickly away’ (*cf.* 30:16; Gn. 19:15–17). The idea of escaping Babylon’s overthrow may be present (*cf.* Je. 51:6). The meagre response to Cyrus’s call to the exiles to return dims the fact that this was indeed a mighty act of God, which gave opportunity for the

world-wide testimony Isaiah envisaged. That Israel did not enter into it in this way should not blind us to what was possible on the basis of the evidence of a God who predicts and fulfils, who directs the mightiest forces of the world for his own purposes and who cares for his insignificant and unworthy people. We need to be careful not to reduce the act itself to the dimensions of the exiles' failure. Redeemed ($\sqrt{gā'}al$) is used here (as in Ex. 6:6) of release from bondage.

21 Exodus imagery continues. The Lord does not bring his people out in order to abandon them but undertakes full after-care. Exodus 17:1–7, in particular, is recalled with its tension between a grumbling, unbelieving people and a merciful, provident God. The allusion could hardly be more apt in the light of their rejection of the Cyrus-plan.

22⁵⁷ A change of scene does not bring a change of heart. Leaving Babylon, the people do not escape from their own character. *Wicked*, a general word, summarizes the charges levelled in chapter 48 (see the introduction above) and, as the last word of the chapter, writes a concise epitaph to the Babylonian experience. It is exactly as the initial section (42:25) said. There has been no moral reform or even recognition of the need of it. Consequently, they have no *peace* (to be understood in the terms set out in verses 18–19). To come home to Canaan is not to come back to God.

E. The greater deliverance (49:1–55:13)

The outlines on pages 289 and 352 show the point Isaiah has now reached in his presentation. The key to this final movement in chapters 40–55 is the contrast between the new beginning afforded by redemption from Babylon (48:20–21) and the unchanged

⁵⁷ Scholars wonder if these words are original. Delitzsch and Young note the words and their meaning but do not explain their position in context. Kissane notes the same words in 57:21, where he believes them to be in place, but he reckons them misplaced here. Whybray wonders if both occurrences may be editorial markers dividing the text into sections. North concurs but also notes that in view of verse 18 the verse is not misplaced here.

relationship to the Lord expressed by ‘no peace ... for the wicked’ ([48:22](#)). This is the backdrop to the ‘greater deliverance’ about to be enacted: the work of the Servant of the Lord.

The shape of the section is as follows:

A¹ The Servant’s double task: Israel and the world ([49:1–6](#))

B¹ Comment: the task to world and Israel confirmed ([49:7–13](#))

C¹ Zion: despondent and unresponsive ([49:14–50:3](#))

A² The Servant: responsive, buoyant, obedient and suffering ([50:4–9](#))

B² Comment: the obedient and the self-willed ([50:10–11](#))

C² Zion: summoned to respond ([51:1–52:12](#))

A³ The Servant: successful, sin-bearing and triumphant ([52:13–53:12](#))

B³ Comment: Israel and the world invited ([54:1–55:13](#))

The pattern is incomplete in that it lacks C³. As we shall see, within the overall unity of the Isaianic literature, this gap is filled by chapters [56–66](#). The pattern of the Servant Songs (established in [42:1–4, 5–9](#), i.e. Song followed by comment) is repeated in each of the three Songs here. The Songs are not extraneous insertions but the pivots on which the sections turn.

1. The Servant’s double task: Israel and the world ([49:1–6](#))

The depiction of the Servant here concurs with the first Song ([42:1–4](#)). In each case a spiritual need cries out for remedy and the Servant is described (biographically in [42:1–4](#), autobiographically here) as a Spirit-endowed agent of divine revelation for whose teaching earth waits ([42:1, 4](#)), and as one whose mouth the Lord had prepared ([49:2](#)), whereby he calls the whole world to hear ([49:1](#)). In neither case is he a political figure. This is particularly to be noted since, in sequence from the homeward road of [48:20–21](#), one might have expected a ministry directed at the aspirations of the returned community. This is a point to bear in mind when we meet geographical, territorial and political terms. For example, Isaiah speaks of the release of prisoners ([42:7; 49:9](#)) and a journey to a new land ([42:16; 49:9–12](#)). The reality, however, is a release from bondage into the freedom of the truth and a pilgrimage, not of the feet, but of mind and heart into the newness the Servant has brought about. The Servant is a covenant figure with a covenant ministry to the world ([42:6](#)) and to Israel ([49:8](#); cf.

[54:10](#)).

To speak of the Servant as a prophetic, covenant figure, however, needs qualification. In [Jeremiah 1:4–5](#) we learn the prehistory of every prophet. Had Jeremiah ever turned this into a testimony it would have had significant points of contact with verses [1–2](#), [5](#). But he never did, nor did any other prophet, and there are grave psychological difficulties in imagining Isaiah (not to mention the secretive Deutero-Isaiah) publicizing verses [1–6](#). Furthermore, the prophets are extremely sparing in world-wide address ([41:1](#); [Je. 31:10](#)), and neither Jeremiah ([Je. 1:5](#)), though called to be a prophet to the nations, nor any prophet, ever said ‘Listen to me’ in this personal way. Delitzsch makes this point precisely: ‘They are to hear what he says, not merely in the words that follow ... What follows is rather a vindication of his right to demand a hearing’.¹ The implication is, in fact, as absolute as the ‘Hear him’ of [Mark 9:7](#). Furthermore, the Servant claims to be ‘Israel’ ([3](#)) and to be in his own person the Lord’s covenant ([8](#)) and salvation ([6](#))—not to be the preacher or even the effectuator of these things, but to be them in himself. These matters, which distinguish the Servant both from the nation and from the believing remnant within it, will be discussed more fully below, as will the uniqueness of the Lord’s intention to ‘display his splendour’ ([3](#)) in his Servant. Certainly the Servant is a prophetic, covenant figure, but he is also much, much more than any prophet ever was or claimed to be.

The second Song, however, goes beyond the first in another way. The same Servant who was there given a world ministry now has a double task. He is sent to Israel as well—indeed, to Israel first. The intervening chapters, and the climactic chapter [48](#), have brought Israel’s plight to the fore so that this is now the priority task. To say simply that the second Song rewrites the Servant’s job-description fails, however, to take account of the change from biography to autobiography. The first Song was a word from the Lord to the world about his Servant: ‘Your plight is known, my Servant will deal with it’; but the second Song is the Servant’s testimony how that world-wide task devolved upon one who was already commissioned to minister to Israel.

The Song itself is a double personal testimony from the Servant to a world audience:

A The first testimony ([1–3](#))

¹ Delitzsch, p. 259.

a¹ World-wide audience ([1ab](#))

b¹ The Servant prepared and named ‘Israel’ ([1c–3](#))

B The second testimony ([4–6](#))

C Despondency and its antidote ([4](#))

b² The Servant prepared and commissioned to Israel ([5](#))

a¹ World-wide salvation ([6](#))

In addition to the above shape of the Song, each ‘testimony’ is presented in the same way: the words of the Servant ([1–2](#), [4](#)) followed by the words of the Lord ([3](#), [5–6](#)).

The first testimony ([49:1–3](#))

World-wide audience (49:1ab)

The summons is to the world in all its extent (*islands*; see on [11:11](#); [40:15](#)) and all its *nations* (this translation implies political or ethnic groupings but *l^eummîm* is more general, meaning ‘peoples’). *Listen* is a common prophetic summons, marking the Servant as a prophet. *To me* is not used by any prophet other than Isaiah, and in Isaiah it is used only of the Lord ([46:3](#), [12](#); [48:12](#); [51:1](#), [7](#); [55:2](#)). How can the Servant address the world as only the Lord would address them (*cf.* [41:1](#))? Is there an as yet undisclosed relationship between the Servant and the Lord which makes this possible?

Before I was born is ‘from [in] the womb’ (*cf.* [Je. 1:5](#)). Even such a personal-sounding statement does not necessarily make the Servant an individual (*cf.* essentially the same idea in [51:1–2](#) used of a company of God-seekers). The individuality of the Servant depends on deeper considerations, as we began to see above. But in fact, in regard to the Messiah, there is often a particular reference to his mother ([7:14](#); [Gn. 3:15](#); [Ps. 22:9f. <10f.>](#) ; [Mi. 5:2–3](#)).² *Called* (as [40:26](#)) refers to position and function. *My birth* is ‘my mother’s body’. *Made mention* (the hiphil of $\sqrt{zākar}$) is (lit.) either ‘to cause x to remember y’ (*i.e.* ‘to bring to/put into people’s minds, to announce’) or ‘to act rememboringly about’, ‘to keep in mind’ (*cf.* [Ps. 20:7 <8>](#)). In the light of the concealment theme the latter is more appropriate. The Lord kept his name secret until the right moment came to announce, ‘This is Israel’.

The Servant prepared and named ‘Israel’ (49:1c–3)

² And possibly the enigmatic [Je. 31:22](#)?

Giving the name *Israel* to the Servant is the controversial storm-centre of these verses, but it is also the structural climax towards which the thought moves.

A

B

- | | |
|---|--|
| <p>1cd Yahweh from the womb called me; from my mother's body he mentioned my name</p> <p>2ab He made my mouth like a sharp sword;</p> <p>2cd He made me a polished arrow;</p> <p>3ab He said to me: 'My servant you are; Israel in whom I will show my beauty'.</p> | <p>in the shade of his hand he hid me;</p> <p>in his quiver he concealed me;</p> |
|---|--|

There is no manuscriptal evidence for removing *Israel*,³ nor in the light of the symmetry of the above outline can there be serious charge on metrical grounds.⁴ The A and B halves of the verses express distinct truths. A starts at birth, proceeds to personal preparation for a ministry of word and ends with the prophet title *my servant* (see [2 Ki. 17:13](#)). B starts at birth with the divine selection of a name, proceeds to the note of 'concealment' (*i.e.* a secret kept for the chosen moment) and ends with the revelation of the name. In other words, both halves are self-consistent: in A, calling leads to servanthood (via training for prophetic ministry); in B, 'having of a name in mind' leads (via a period

³ The manuscript Kennicott 96 lacks the word 'Israel'. It is well known for its variants, and apart from this place no importance is attached to it (see H. H. Rowley, *The Servant of the Lord* [Lutterworth, 1952], p. 8). 'Even if K 96 were a good MS', says North, 'we should hardly be justified in following it in defiance of the otherwise unanimous textual evidence' (*Second Isaiah*, p. 187).

⁴ Mowinckel contends that 'Israel' makes verse 3 into a 3+4 or a 4+5 line in a 3+3 or 4+4 context. This extremely unclear and indecisive comment occurs in *He that Cometh* (Blackwell, 1959), p. 462f. On the other hand, North says that to delete 'Israel' results in a 3+2 line in a 3+3 context. Discerning metre is not an exact science! But even if 'Israel' overloaded the line, this is exactly what a Hebrew poet might do in order to impart emphasis. The genius of Hebrew poetry is not (as in classical Greek and Latin) the skill which expresses the desired meaning within a prescribed form, but the skill which subjects a flexible form to the overriding priority of expressing meaning.

of concealment) to the revelation of the name. We may take the text, therefore, as it stands.

2 On war metaphors see 11:14. Isaiah does not have in mind a war-making task for the Servant (the theme of chapters 56–66) but the warfare of the word. The sharpness of a *sword* is its effectiveness; a *polished arrow* is rubbed free from roughness or unevenness which might deflect it in flight, hence its accuracy. The *sword* wins victories close at hand (6a); the *arrow* hits distant targets (6b; cf. 57:19; Eph. 2:17). *His hand ... hid me in his quiver* denotes personal preparation and care, reservation for a chosen target and the intimacy of the Lord and his Servant.

3 *Israel* was the name of an individual before it became a national name. At Bethel (Gn. 28:13f.; 35:9–15) Jacob received the name and with it the blessing and responsibility of the Abrahamic promises. At that moment the weight of the world rested on his shoulders. Isaiah brings us full circle back to such a moment as he penetrates the secrets of the Lord's age-long workings; the giving of the name to the Servant here 'surely reflects the prophets discovery that Israel in exile is not really capable at that moment of living up to what it means to be Israel'.⁵ The moment of discovery was 48:1–2; the evidence on which it rested, 48:3–8; and the discovery itself was somewhat more than Israel's incapacity to live up to an ideal, rather the forfeiture of all right to the name. In consequence, either the Lord must acquiesce in the failure of his plans and promises or else he must find a true and worthy Israel. The Servant is this wondrous new beginning. *Display my splendour* ($\sqrt{pā'ar}$) occurs thirteen times in the Old Testament, of which nine are in Isaiah. On all other occasions, the Lord 'shows his beauty' by what he does for his people (44:23; 60:21); but here it is what is done for him. Elsewhere the plural is used of those in whom the Lord shows his beauty, but here the Servant (singular) is the focus. This is never said to any prophet or individual, or to Israel or any group within Israel. Isaiah says a unique thing about a unique person.

The second testimony (49:4–6)

Despondency and its antidote (49:4)

The Servant is despondent because although no effort has been spared (*I have laboured ... spent my strength*) nothing has been achieved (*to no purpose, in vain, for nothing*). But

⁵ J. Goldingay, *God's Prophet, God's Servant* (Paternoster Press, 1984), p. 128.

this is only the first thought, not the last; to remain here is to remain despondent, to sink into depression. Yet ('ākēn, 'but indeed'), a conjunction calling attention to a contrary truth, a contrast to what might have been imagined, is used to convey the thought that it is for the Lord (not me) to decide what is *due to me* and for him (not me) to apportion *reward* for labour. The antidote to despondency is first, the wisdom of God (*due to me*/‘my judgment’ means what is right to decide about me). To the Servant all seems a waste of effort, but he turns from his own wisdom and rests in the God who called and appointed him. Secondly, it is the power of God (*reward* is rather ‘outcome of work’). He himself sees nothing coming out of all his effort, but it is not for him to decide. As the called Servant (1–2) he has been faithful in labouring and spending himself, now it is for the Lord to bring what fruit he will out of it all. Resting faith is the answer to despondency.⁶ Thus, Isaiah foresaw a Servant with a real human nature, tested like we are and proving himself to be the author and perfecter of the way of faith, a real, personal faith that can still say *my God* when nothing any longer seems worthwhile. *No purpose* (*rīq*) is ‘emptiness’; *in vain* (*tōhū*) is what is without sense or meaning (cf. 24:10); *nothing* (*hebel*) means ‘without substance or solidity’.

The Servant prepared and commissioned to Israel (49:5)

The NIV accurately reflects the broken construction of verse 5. Beginning to record what the Lord said (5a), the Servant finds himself suddenly reminded of his own preparation (5b), what he was prepared for (5cd) and his consequent dignity and strength in God (5ef). Thus, if the Servant’s antidote to despondency was resting faith (4cd), the Lord’s antidote is to speak his word (5a). The primary effect of the word, however, is to bring

⁶ Where in the experience of the Lord Jesus is there room for this despondency? The darkness of Gethsemane does not fit the case for there, in so far as we may reverently understand that experience, his distress sprang not from the past but from the impending future. But there are moments in the gospels when the Lord Jesus faced ill-minded rejection, blind unbelief, prejudice and misunderstanding; when people and disciples were caught up in the glamour of signs and wonders, and the primary task of preaching was threatened; when he cried ‘How long ...!’ (Lk. 9:41); when he could only sigh over continuing failure to understand (Mk. 8:21); and when he foresaw the falling away of the inner group (Mk. 14:27). Maybe what was thus diffused throughout our Lord’s whole earthly course, Isaiah compresses into a single moment.

God into the situation so that what would by itself cause despondency is set in a new context. The Servant is reminded that God has fashioned him for this very thing. Even his conception (*in the womb*) was timed and aimed in relation to the work he would do. Or, if we translate ‘from the womb’, every single experience of life from its inception has been a sharpening of the sword and a polishing of the arrow for this service. He has been fashioned for effectiveness. Evidence to the contrary is transient appearance not ultimate reality. The task which seems to have defeated him is in fact the very thing the Lord has prepared him for: to *bring Jacob back to him*,⁷ the spiritual restoration of the people. Well then, what can hinder its accomplishment! Thus despondency flies away and buoyancy takes its place. He is, before the Lord, an honoured person, in vocation, status, name and task. To say that God is his *strength* is not to say that his strength comes from God but that God is so present with him and in him that the divine strength becomes his. The issue running throughout verses 4c–5, then, is this: despondency arises through listening to ourselves and our self-assessment etc., instead of looking to God, recalling his purposes, living according to our dignity in him and rediscovering in him our source of power. *And now the LORD says or ‘Well then [w^eattâ; making a logical connection] the LORD said’*, is the divine rejoinder, matching *But I said* in verse 4. *My God has been my strength* (all along, though momentarily I failed to see it) or ‘has become my strength’ (becoming in experience what he always was, though it did not seem so).

World-wide salvation (49:6)

He says/said recapitulates verse 5a.⁸ What the Lord says here is central to the question of whether the Servant can be identified with the nation or with the remnant or must be an individual—and if the latter, whether he can be identified autobiographically with the prophet or not. First, it has to be said that it is difficult to see how Jacob can bring

⁷ *Gather Israel to himself* is one of the verses where there is a tension between *lō'* ('not') and *lô* ('to him'); cf. 9:3^c2. ‘And that Israel be not swept away’ is possible, but the Massoretes recommended ‘to him’ (supported by Q^a), and this is undoubtedly the correct course.

⁸ Slight uncertainty about the text here is not crucial. The written text has *nṣyr*, presumably *nāṣîr*. This word is not found elsewhere but would be a respectable passive noun ('preserved one'). The Massoretes recommend *nāṣûr*, passive participle of the same verb, with the same meaning.

back Jacob. North's neat phrase that 'the first mission of the church is to the church'⁹ is only a concise way of saying that there are some within 'the church' (the 'real' people of God) who have a responsibility to minister to their formal associates. As soon as one tries to apply the 'corporate view' it becomes in this way a concealed 'remnant view'. Secondly, who are *those of Israel I have kept*/'the preserved ones of Israel'? Deuteronomy 32:10 uses the same verb ($\sqrt{nāṣar}$) of the Lord's guardianship of his people, and Psalm 32:7 uses it of his protection of the penitent. Alone of the prophets Isaiah uses it of the Lord's preservation of the believer (26:3), his care of his vineyard (27:3) and his preservation of his Servant (42:6; 49:8). There is not sufficient evidence to say that Isaiah is always thinking of an individual or group (a remnant) within the people but, on ground of suitability, such is the best meaning here, as reflected in the NIV (cf. 10:21, 'A remnant will return, a remnant of Jacob will return to the Mighty God'). This supernaturally preserved company are brought back to the Lord through the ministry of the Servant, who thus has to be distinguished from both nation and remnant.

The Servant has been sent to *restore*/'raise up' those prostrate, in context, beneath the burden of sin and *bring back* those distanced, alienated from the Lord. This is the task of which the Servant despaired (4) but now, as part of the reassurance to him that he will indeed succeed in it, the Lord speaks of it as by itself falling far below the capacity and dignity of his Servant (*too small*). Therefore, a wider work is included in his vocation: to be a *light for the Gentiles*/'all peoples' and to *bring ... salvation* to the whole world (*the ends of the earth*). Even supposing that it was an easy thing to accept the near-megalomania of a prophet thinking of himself as 'Israel' (3), it would still be too much to expect that he could himself be the light and salvation of the world. The Hebrew resists the NIV's *that you may bring my salvation* and requires 'that you may be my salvation', for in the parallelism of the verse, 'that you should be my servant' and 'that you should be my salvation' balance each other. The thought is not that the Servant is the agent in communicating salvation but that he is in his own person the salvation¹⁰ the world needs,

⁹ North, *Second Isaiah*, p. 189.

¹⁰ The vocabulary of *salvation* is more abundant in Isaiah than in any other prophet. The noun *yēšu‘â* (found only in Jon. 2:9-10 and Hab. 3:18 among the prophets, but nineteen times in Isaiah) is spread evenly throughout the literature. The related noun *yēša‘* occurs five times in Isaiah but is otherwise found only in Mi. 7:7; Hab. 3:13, 18. The verb $\sqrt{yāšā‘}$ appears twenty-nine times

and, in the same way, the world's *light*.¹¹ However such a vocation is to be fulfilled, it runs beyond that of a (mere) prophet—indeed it runs beyond that of a mere human. But Isaiah will tell his story in his own time.

2. Divine confirmation: the Servant's success (49:7–13)

This 'tailpiece' to the second Servant Song resembles that which followed the first. In 42:5–9, following the announcement formula 'This is what God the LORD says', the Servant's world-wide task is confirmed in covenant terms, and an oracle blending third and first person (42:10–17) sketches the pilgrimage of the world home to the Lord. The second Song, with its double 'job-description', is followed by two oracles introduced by the announcement formula 'This is what the LORD says' (7, 8). They deal respectively with the Servant's task to the world and, in covenant terms, to Israel. Then there is an oracle blending first and third person which sketches an exodus journey (9c–10) and a world-wide gathering to God (11–12). The theme of 42:10 is reflected in the concluding Song of 49:13. Such similarity cannot be accidental but, granted the careful editing of the Isaianic literature, it is not unexpected in the light of the identical theme, the Servant's 'job-description', which forms the heart of the first two Songs. No doubt the units which form this mosaic each had their own prehistory, but the new integration has been done skilfully to achieve a balanced presentation of the theme of the Servant's success.

A World-wide effectiveness (7–9b)

a¹ The Servant and Gentile recognition (7)

b¹ The Servant and the covenant with Israel (8–9b)

B World-wide gathering (9c–12)

throughout Isaiah, otherwise only Jeremiah has a significant usage (eighteen times). The personalized use ('God is salvation') is rare (e.g. Ex. 15:2; Ps. 35:3; Is. 12:2 (twice); 33:2) and is applied only to God himself. To say of a human being 'you are my salvation' is unexemplified.

¹¹ *Light* is a rich metaphor, signifying hope, relief, lifting of gloom, a sense of meaning and purpose (Jb. 3:20; 18:5; Pss. 36:9; 56:13¹⁴) and of truth (Ps. 43:3), Ps. 27:1 couples light and salvation. Isaiah uses *light* of the revealed way of the Lord (2:5; 42:6; 51:4; 60:1, 3), of hope (5:30; 42:16; 45:7; 58:8, 10; 59:9) and of the Lord (10:17; 60:19–20) and the day of the Lord (30:26). These usages can be paralleled through the prophets, but Isaiah alone uses *light* of moral integrity (5:20) and of the Messianic hope (9:2; 42:6; 49:6; 60:1, 3).

b² An exodus journey ([9c–10](#))

a² World gathering ([11–12](#))

C World-wide joy ([13](#))

a¹ and b¹ (each of nine lines) have the same introductory formula; b² and a² (respectively six and five lines) have matching opening lines, ‘beside the roads’ ([9c](#)) and ‘into roads’ ([11](#)), suitable to their theme of journeying.

World-wide effectiveness ([49:7–9b](#))

The Servant and Gentile recognition (49:7)

In line with what has preceded, we must understand *Israel* here to refer to the Servant. Throughout chapters [49–55](#) ‘Israel’ occurs only as part of a divine title ([54:5; 55:5](#)); the nation is named ‘Zion’. The verse begins and ends (lines ab, gh) on the same theme: the Lord’s commitment to his Servant. In the full reality of his divine nature (*Holy One*) the Lord undertakes his function as Next-of-kin (*gō’ēl, Redeemer*; cf. [35:9f.](#)), the guardian of the Servant’s interests and guarantor of his every need (ab). The outcome of the Servant’s career (gh) is because the same God is faithful to his chosen one. The intervening lines (cd, ef) describe an unexplained contrast in world reaction to the Servant whereby abhorrence becomes respect. The verse thus has an a-b-b-a formation.

Because he is the Servant he has a servant nature (cf. [Lk. 22:27](#)) and, in a way Isaiah does not here explain, suffers the demeaning of his dignity (*despised*) at the hands of earthly *rulers* and the world they represent. *The nation* (*gôy*) is singular and indefinite and is used here as a generic term for the world outside Israel. *Despised*/‘a despising of soul’ (*b^ezōh nepeš*)¹² means either ‘one despised from the heart’ (i.e. deeply despised) or ‘one despised for what he himself is’ (i.e. personally despised). The required meaning of *abhorred by the nation*/‘by people’ is plain but the Hebrew form is unusual.¹³ The idea is very strong: ‘held in popular repugnance’. *The Servant* is one whom they consider to be at their disposal (cf. [Jn. 19:10](#)). Thus, Isaiah is aware that rejection and demeaning is to be the Servant’s lot; [50:4–9](#) and [52:13–53:12](#) are already casting their shadow. He does

¹² On the form *b^ezōh* see [Gn. 48:11](#); [Pr. 16:16](#); [GKC 75n](#). Q^a reads *b^ezûy* (the passive participle), which leaves the meaning unchanged.

¹³ ‘Abhorred by people’ is suitable to the context and can hardly be doubted as the intention of the words, but *m^et* (see North, Whybray, [BHS](#), [KB](#)).

not explain this, however, any more than he explains the sudden transformation in lines ef, where *rulers* now *rise up* to greet a superior and *bow down* in acknowledgment of his status. The contrasting actions of rising and prostrating express totality of subservience. On *Kings* and *princes* see 32:1. In *see you*, ‘you’ is an interpretative addition and should be omitted. We are not told what they see and must await the ‘See’ of 52:13 before we shall discover it. In his mastery of suspense, Isaiah leaves it all like that. The despised Servant becomes the acknowledged Servant, with the only explanation that throughout the Lord has been *faithful*, has maintained his holiness and never gone back on his choice (gh).

The Servant and the covenant with Israel (49:8–9b)

Corresponding to the revelation in the Song that the Servant felt thoroughly despondent over his efforts and found refreshing and confidence in the Lord, we meet him here as the man of prayer (8b), receiving assurance of the Lord’s help so that as covenant man (8e) he will bring a fourfold blessing of security (8f), enjoyment (8g), liberation (9a) and transformation (9b). In answer to prayer, the Lord will prove himself to be all his Servant needs. The ‘my’ in *the time of my favour* should be omitted. The noun *favour* (*rāšōn*) and its verb (*✓rāšâ*) in their majority use refer to the Lord and that which accords with his will, that which, in doing or receiving, gives him delight. Hence a ‘time of favour’ is a time (*'ēt; cf. 13:22*) which accords absolutely with his will. The closer definition, *day of salvation*, is a day marked by salvation accomplished and available. We do not yet know how the Servant is to be involved in this, but he is assured that when this divinely appropriate season arrives and the day for accomplishing salvation dawns, his prayer will be answered. *Will answer* and *will help* are both perfects of certainty, ‘have determined to ...’. Until that time comes the Lord will *keep* (on ‘keep’ see verse 6) him and will then *make* him all he needs to be. In 42:6 the qualifying ‘light to the nations’ was required to indicate a reference to bringing Gentiles into the Lord’s *covenant*. Here the context makes a reference to Israel clear. But the Servant is more than a covenant officiant or instigator; he is in his own person the Lord’s covenant. Here again is the claim that exalts the Servant above any prophet (cf. verse 6). In biblical thought the covenant is a unilateral pledge and consequent work of God. To speak of the Servant as the covenant means that while, as we know, it is through his work that covenant blessings become available, it is only in him, in the union of personal relationship, that these

blessings can be enjoyed. Prophets preached the covenant and pointed away from themselves to the Lord; the Servant will actualize the blessings and point to himself. On *land*, *inheritances*, *captives* and *darkness* cf. 42:6–7. The physical is a motif of the spiritual: *restore*/‘raise up’ is used in the sense of making secure, establishing (as, e.g. 2 Ch. 7:18); *reassign*/‘cause to inherit’ means to bring into possession and enjoyment; for *the captives*/‘those who are bound’ the Servant spells freedom; to *Be free*/‘show yourselves’ is to enjoy a new-found liberty.

World-wide gathering (49:9c–12)

An exodus journey (49:9c–10)

Between Egyptian bondage and the enjoyment of Canaan lay a wilderness journey in which the people experienced the care of God. So in the pilgrimage of the heart back to God there is:

(i) Provision (9cd). They will *feed*/‘pasture’ as the Lord’s flock *beside the roads*, i.e. pasture will be ready to hand, meeting them at every step, and even the *barren hill* will be transformed to supply their need.

(ii) Protection (10ab). They will be protected from every inner failure of strength (*hunger* and *thirst*) and from every outward threat (*heat* and *sun*). *Heat* (*šārāb*; 35:7) is probably parched ground underneath, as *sun* is pitiless heat above, making a picture of total protection. Though Young decides against *šārāb* meaning ‘mirage’ here, he does so in the belief that the meaning does not suit the context. On the other hand, the idea of protection from disappointment is a telling additional thought.¹⁴

(iii) Guardianship (10cd). All the earlier blessings are explained: the journey is under divine compassionate leadership. The passage is full of doublets, signifying completeness: food/water; hunger/thirst; desert heat/desert sun. Now we have *guide* and *lead* and no distinction can be made between the former ($\sqrt{nāhaḡ}$) and the latter ($\sqrt{nāḥal}$); the idea is doubled simply to stress a total leadership. *Compassion* ($\sqrt{rāḥam}$) is the love that is emotionally moved, both distinctively maternal (1 Ki. 3:26) and truly paternal (Ps. 103:13).

World gathering (49:11–12)

The element of care is intensified by the return of first person singular (cf. verse 8).

¹⁴ Young, p. 280.

11 The Lord sovereignly manages everything, even to the extent that mountains which might seem insurmountable to the pilgrims can be approached with confidence. After all, they are *my mountains*, not an alien barrier but part of the Creator's world, there to do his bidding and subserve his will. The man-made bits also are his (*my highways*), and they will be plain to see (*raised up*) so that the pilgrims cannot go astray. Neither obstacle nor uncertainty will prevent their homecoming.

12 No consideration of distance (*from afar*) or location (*north ... west ... Aswan*) will prevent pilgrimage. There is no reference to the east (unless it is included in the to us unknown 'Sinim'; see the NIV mg.), maybe because Isaiah did not want this journey to be confused with the return from Babylon. The NIV's *Aswan* is only a guess (see [Ezk. 29:10; 30:6](#)). The **Q^a** reading *swnyym* may help to confirm Sinim as *s^ewēnēh* or Aswan but, more likely, it also is a guess compromising between the unknown and a place where some exiles were known to have settled. The older identification of Sinim with China lacks confirmation. Maybe Isaiah was being deliberately obscure, making the point that uncharted places are known to God, and even from them he will gather his pilgrims.

World-wide joy ([49:13](#))

The Lord has confirmed both sides of his Servant's task; now all are summoned to sing. As usual, singing is a picture of entering with joy upon benefits for which one has done nothing (cf. [12:1](#); [24:16](#); [25:1](#); [30:29](#); [54:1](#)). The song celebrates what the Lord has done. *Heavens* and *earth* express totality, and *mountains* are singled out as the places from which good news was heralded ([40:9](#)). On *comforts* see [40:1](#). The perfect tense may signify a present (this is an unchanging feature of the Lord) or a sure future (*i.e.* a perfect of certainty, 'has determined to') or, best here, a past. All creation is envisaged as looking back to something which has already happened. In context, *his people* cannot be restricted to Israel as previously constituted. In the Servant, salvation, covenant blessings and light have extended to the whole world ([6](#)); a world-wide people has taken to the pilgrim route home. This is the song of the 'world church'. *Afflicted* is 'humbled, humiliated, downtrodden'. Lines d and e have a classical shape with the verbs at the beginning and the end: 'for comforted has the Lord his people and on his downtrodden

^aThe St Mark's Isaiah Scroll from Qumran.

ones he has had compassion'. The Lord's people are central to his concerns, encircled by comfort and (as verse 10) compassion.

3. The many and the one: unresponsiveness and response (49:14–50:11)

The sense of anticlimax at 49:14 could hardly be stronger. Reminiscent of the 'Why do you say, O Jacob?' of 40:27 after the assurances of 40:1–26, the complaining voice of Zion contrasts sharply with the world song over the work of the Servant. The use of the name 'Zion' is significant. The terminus of the journey of 48:20–21 was a ruined, desolate city. Isaiah takes up this reality and uses it to picture the people themselves in their need. The actual charge of unresponsiveness comes in 50:1–3, where it stands in counterpoint to the responsiveness of the single, testifying voice (50:4–9) of the Servant (50:10–11). Up to that point the Lord heaps promise upon promise in an attempt to reassure the people and win their trust, but it is all to no avail. They remain the dispirited and unbelieving many in contrast to the one, who responds with buoyant faith.

The section opens with five speeches of the Lord. The first (14–18b) replies directly to Zion's complaint; the rest are introduced by a speech formula (18c, 22, 24–25; 50:1). The sons-mother theme unites this series (17, 20, 22, 25; 50:1), in which the first four parts form two pairs and the fifth part leads into the third Servant Song (50:4–11).

- A The unforgetting Lord (49:14–21)
 - a¹ The gathering family (14–18b)
 - b¹ The gathered family, an enigma (18c–21)
- B The conquering Lord (22–26)
 - a² Captors subservient: the gathering family (22–23)
 - b² Captors overcome: the family explained (24–26)
- C The redeeming Lord (50:1–3)
 - c¹ The unresponsive family (1–2b)
 - d¹ The competent Lord (2c–3)
- D The sovereign Lord (4–11)
 - c² The responsive Servant (4–6)
 - d² The competent Lord (7–9)
 - e The Servant and the remnant (10–11)

a¹ and b¹ share the theme word ‘sons’ (17, 20), respectively begin and end with Zion’s words (14, 21) and are linked by ‘all of them’ (18bd). a² and b² continue the son theme (22, 25) and share the theme of captors overcome. Each opens with an announcement formula (21, 25) and concludes with a statement about knowledge of the Lord (23f, 26c). The gathering family (a¹) is explained by the subservient co-operation of the erstwhile captors (a²), and the enigma of Zion’s family (b¹) is explained by the Lord’s saving work (b²). The relationship between C and D is the contrast between unresponsiveness and response, which is the theme of the whole section, and ‘Sovereign’ forms a telling inclusio. Despondent Zion uses the title (14b, ‘even the Sovereign has forgotten me’) but does not believe it; the Servant reiterates it (50:4, 5, 7, 9) as one who is convinced of it. On the one hand, Zion is offered every inducement to trust (14–26) yet does not; the Servant’s ear is opened to learn of suffering and rejection (5–6), yet he responds with commitment and faith. The contrast between the Servant who is Israel (49:3) and Zion who used to be Israel (48:1–2) is complete.

The unforgetting Lord (49:14–21)

The gathering family (49:14–18b)

The word ‘love’ is not used of the Lord in these verses, but they could hardly be more redolent of the reality. The words of thoughtless despondency (14) are countered by direct rebuttal (15–16) and by a word of promise (17–18b). The antidote to despondency is first to direct the mind to God and secondly to rest on his word.

14 Zion thinks she has been *forsaken* and *forgotten* (out of sight, out of mind). However, *the LORD* (Yahweh) has an eternal name (Ex. 3:14–15), which cannot alter and which he revealed in his redeeming work for his captive people in Egypt; and *the Lord* (*'adōnāy*) is the ‘Sovereign’ who cannot be put under compulsion to do anything which contradicts his name. Zion would have been better employed in exercising her own memory than in accusing the Lord of losing his!

15 Mother and infant are bound by intimate dependence (*the baby at her breast*) and shared life (*the child she has borne*/‘the son of her body’). Yet even in relation to these there can be failure and forgetfulness. On *compassion* see 1 Kings 3:26. In *Though she/Indeed even these ...* the emphatic pronoun ‘these’ acts as a foil for the emphatic *I/But as for me ...*: the love of the Lord transcends in permanence the best earth can offer.

16 The word *See* implies a gesture of spreading out palms incised with the self-inflicted (*engraved*, as on a rock or precious stone) wounds of Zion's name. When the Servant's sufferings are reviewed (50:6; 53:4ff.) his hands are not mentioned; that is reserved for a later date (Jn. 20:19–20). *Your walls* represent either the mute appeal of desolation (Pss. 74:3; 102:13f.) or the plans of the new Jerusalem.

17 The promise of the gathering family is, on earth, a supreme antidote to parental depression.¹⁵ *Who laid you waste* is two verbs in the MT, 'demolished you and left you waste'. The Lord would assure his despondent Zion that he understands how truly terrible the experience has been. The first verb, *hāras* ('to tear down'), refers to the process of destruction; the second, *hārēb* ('to leave as a wasteland'), to the result. The two lines are beautifully balanced with the verbs at each end, counterpoising 'come back' and 'go away'.

18ab *All your sons*/‘all of them’ matches the same word at the start of the next stanza.

The gathered family, an enigma (49:18c–21)

The last stanza ended with the imminent arrival of ‘all of them’; this one begins with Zion’s welcome to them. More come back, however, than ever went, so that the city is too cramped for the new population, and Zion cannot make out where they have come from or who superintended their growth. This, of course, is the terminology of the return from Babylon put to a new use (see specially 50:1–3). Such a triumphant return, with superabundant numbers, could have been true in 539 BC, but only a meagre few responded to Cyrus’s liberation edict. The majority settled for the comforts they had discovered in Babylon. But Isaiah has left all that behind at 48:20–21. His focus now is on spiritual reality, people returning to the Lord due to a divine work of salvation and redemption (see verse 26 in the parallel section; cf. 50:2).

18cd The bridal metaphor is part of Isaiah’s Zion theology (cf. 4:5; 62:4–5). He never

¹⁵ Instead of the MT’s *bānayik* (‘builders’). This makes a good contrast with ‘those who laid you waste’ and is widely recommended. But it is conceivable that Q^a was swayed by this contrast in fixing its text. The true contrast, however, is between the ‘destroyers’ who banished the ‘sons’ and the return of the ‘sons’ marking the end of the rule of the ‘destroyers’. Besides, if we remove ‘sons’ from verse 17, ‘all of them’ (18) refers to the builders, and why should Zion want to bind them on as an ornament (19)? The theme of ‘sons’ runs right through this section.

minds mixing metaphors; here the mother of sons becomes the bride dressing for her wedding.

19 The Hebrew is broken, reflecting the excitement of the occasion: ‘For, as regards your waste and devastated areas and your demolished land—indeed now you will be too constricted for the inhabitants ...’. Isaiah is a past master at letting his emotions rule his syntax. Whatever he started out to say about the wastelands was caught up into the vision of a restored Zion too small for its people. *Devoured/‘swallowed you up’* is a metaphor for ‘disappearing without trace’;¹⁶ the new Zion will be in total safety (as verse 17).

20–21 More and more Isaiah is preparing for the revelation yet to come: that the children of Zion are the ‘seed’ of the Servant (53:10; 54:1ff.), the firstfruits of the company of the redeemed, not children of natural birth. *Bereaved and barren* expresses the personal side of Zion’s calamity, just as *exiled/‘captive’* and *rejected/‘turned away’* (*i.e.* evicted or turned from, deserted) express the public reality. The motifs are those of the Babylonian captivity, but the references to barrenness *etc.* (the deprivation of the normal possibilities of a family) show that the picture is not that of a population explosion while in exile with more returning than ever went. Other as yet unexplained factors are involved. The initial ‘See’ before *I was left alone*, which forms an inclusio with *See* in verse 16, should be restored; it is the ‘See’ of divine love and of human astonishment. In due course the former will provide the answer to the latter, but not yet.

The conquering Lord (49:22–26)

Captors subservient: the gathering family (49:22–23)

Another side to the picture of the gathering family is presented here. The Lord’s sovereignty is such that he will bend every power on earth to work for the ingathering of his people and the welfare of Zion.

22 Young rightly notes how suitable it is to begin this stanza with a reference to the *Sovereign LORD* that has only to signal and the nations fall into line. The Lord *will lift up my banner*,¹⁷ and as once the nations obeyed to destroy (5:26), so they now obey to serve

¹⁶ The metaphorical use of *√bāla'* may have originated in Nu. 16:32, 34. It is found in Isaiah in 3:12; 9:15; 19:3; 25:7; 28:7 and elsewhere in the prophets only in Je. 51:34; Ho. 8:7; Hab. 1:13.

¹⁷ The noun *banner* (*nēs*) occurs ten times in Isaiah (5:26; 11:10, 12; 13:2; 18:3; 30:17; 31:9; 33:23;

(cf. Acts 4:25–28).

23 The submission of the nations is necessary not in order to initiate a servile relationship but (as in 45:14–25) because those who would join the people of God must first submit to them (cf. 1 Cor. 14:25). The picture is of political subservience but the reality is the recognition of spiritual indebtedness. In the long run Zion *will know* that everything that the Lord promised has come about and that ‘waiting’ (40:31)—patient, expectant, resting faith—is a completely rewarding experience.

Captors overcome: the family explained (49:24–26)

As in the second stanza of the first pair (18c–21), we come to the practicalities which put the previous oracle into effect.

24 Calling Zion’s children home involves breaking the power of the nations, hence *Can plunder be taken from warriors?* (24a). The Lord has promised, but has he the power to keep his promise? But this is not all. The Hebrew of 24b continues: ‘Or can lawful captives (‘righteous captives/captives of the righteous’) be rescued?’¹⁸ There is another power besides physical strength, the power of law, of right. Can a captor who has every right to his captives be deprived of them? Can captives who have justly been taken captive be set free?

25 This verse replies to each question in turn. *Warriors*, even if *fierce*, cannot hold their prey if superior force is applied (whose power this is, verse 26 reveals). Furthermore, the Lord himself undertakes to see to the legal side of the matter (‘and your cause I will myself plead’, 25d). The translation of $\sqrt{rīb}$ (see 1:17) as *contend* disguises the fact that legal terminology is involved. It would not be right to say that in every case the *rīb* group of words must be forensic, it can be as flexible as ‘taking sides with’, but its legal

49:22; 62:10) and the verb in 59:19, when the NIV offers a different meaning (see the commentary). Only Isaiah uses the picture of the Lord lifting his banner. The noun occurs eleven times in the rest of the Old Testament.

¹⁸ It is commonplace to alter *saddiq* (‘righteous’) to ‘*ārīṣ* (‘fierce, tyrannical’) following Q^a. On the LXX’s ‘If anyone takes a captive unjustly, shall he be safe?’ Ottley remarks that this is ‘pretty well what the LXX might be expected to do with *saddiq* if they felt its difficulty’. The LXX thus offers the MT its convoluted support! But ‘righteous’ is essential to the passage in both parallelism and soteriology.

force is required here by the emphasis on the ‘righteous captor’ of verse 24b. This in turn underlines a vital element in the Lord’s saving work (25e), that every just claim of the law is satisfied (*cf.* 45:21; 53:11; 54:14, 17). It is thus contextually defensible and theologically essential to preserve the Hebrew text of verse 24. When the Lord uses his power to save, neither his own righteous character nor any other right (even that of his foes) is violated. *Your children* is ‘sons’ (*cf.* 17, 20, 22).

26 The emphasis of this entire passage has been on a movement to Zion, whether of Zion’s sons or of the nations, represented by their rulers, hastening the ‘sons’ home and submitting to them in Zion. There is also, however, the less palatable truth that there are those who resist the Lord’s way and maintain their opposition to his people. Maybe ‘eating their own flesh’ and ‘drinking their own blood’ draws on a picture of siege conditions with cannibalism as the last resort against starvation. But the reality is that those who choose their own way are in the end self-destructive, and it is part of the divine justice which rules the world to effect this outcome. Self-destruction is a recurring feature in the ‘wars of the Lord’ (see Jdg. 7:22; 1 Sa. 14:20; 2 Ch. 20:23f.). *All mankind* is ‘all flesh’. When the Lord works with power and right to save his people and to overthrow his enemies he is revealed as *the LORD*, Yahweh, the God who defined his name at the beginning by exactly this double action (Ex. 3:14–15). On *Saviour* ($\sqrt{yāšā}$) see 25:9, and on *Redeemer* ($gō'ēl$) see 35:9f. *Mighty* ($'ābīr$) isolates the attribute of power as such. In 34:7 it is used of bulls, which were proverbial for strength; in 10:13, of the Assyrian king boasting of irresistible power; and in 46:12, of the absolute resistance to God of unrepentant hearts. The form here ($'ābīr$) may have been specially devised to focus on the absolute power of the Lord free from any taint of bull worship or suggestion of merely brute strength. Apart from Genesis 49:24 and Psalm 132:2, it is used only in Isaiah of the Lord (1:24; 60:16). Here it forms an inclusio with *Sovereign* in verse 22 at the beginning of this pair of stanzas.

The redeeming Lord (50:1–3)

The introductory formula (*cf.* 49:22, 25), the mother-sons theme (*cf.* 49:17, 20, 22, 25) and the question form of the opening (*cf.* 49:15, 24) unites this stanza to the preceding four. The two possibilities of divorce (1bc) and sale into slavery (1ef) link it with 49:14–18a and 22ff. respectively. Divorce accuses the unfailing love of failure; sale into slavery accuses sovereign power of weakness. The questions in verse 2bc give the lie to

the complaints with which the series opened ([49:14](#)), that Zion felt forsaken and forgotten. This is not so, the Lord replies, rather, when he came no-one responded.

The unresponsive family ([50:1–2b](#))

1 The thrust of the two hypothetical situations, divorce and sale, is to ask if something irretrievable has happened, terminating a relationship. Marriage is a covenant motif (e.g. [Je. 2:1–3; 3:1–2](#); [Ezk. 16](#)). Behind it here lies the dreaded possibility that the Lord's covenant with his people may have suffered a final breach. According to [Deuteronomy 24:1–4](#) a divorce could set in train a series of events making the reconstitution of the first marriage impossible. The absence of a *certificate*, however, would indicate that this process had not even been started and that, therefore, the door was open to a reconciliation. In default of ability to pay a debt *creditors* ([Ex. 21:7](#); [2 Ki. 4:1ff.](#); [Ne. 5:1–5](#)) could take (by force even) the debtor's children into slavery. This did not constitute (as far as we know) an irremediable situation, but it did, as long as it lasted, leave the debtor without rights. The initial 'See' before *Because of your sins* should be restored. 'See' is one of the features of this whole series ([49:16, 21, 22](#)); it is never used needlessly and should not be overlooked by translators. *Sins* ('āwōn) is the inner perversion of the heart, transgressions (*peša'*) is wilful rebellion. *Sold*, while arising from the foregoing illustration, has also a long history in [Judges 2:14; 3:8; 4:2; 10:7](#). This allusion would stir memories that in those situations the Lord had also 'raised up saviours' ([Jdg. 3:9, 15](#)). This is not to minimize the seriousness of being 'sold for sin' but to comfort with the thought that the Lord has had long experience in handling his people's rebellions and is unlikely to be defeated in the present situation. It is not, therefore, open to Zion to say that sin and iniquity preclude a response to the Lord's call of grace. To him the fact that it is a matter of sin and transgression is rather proof that unresponsiveness is unreasonable and inexcusable, hence the *why?* of verse [2](#).

2 The interrogative *why?* (*maddūa'*) is used in [5:4](#), and the syntax of the two sentences is the same. The association of these passages is deft. In each case the Lord has done all that can and needs to be done; the failed crop and the failure to respond are alike without excuse. We would have expected 'Why did you not answer', but the change to *why was there no-one/'no man' ... no-one to answer?* is deliberate. The emphasis on 'not a single individual ... no-one at all' provides the contrast with the sole responding voice of the Servant ([4](#)). *I came ... I called* is reminiscent of [Genesis 3:8f.](#), the voice of love and

longing here contradicting the accusations of 49:14ff. *Arm*/‘hand’ and *strength* reaffirm the divine sovereign power of 49:22ff. Can this be called in question? The ‘hand’ is the organ of personal agency. *Ransom* is a noun, *p^edūt* (cf. Pss. 111:9; 130:7), from √ *pādā*, (cf. 1:27; 35:10). This word asks if the Lord has resources at his disposal for a ransom payment; whereas *strength* (*kōah*) is a matter of internal capacity, the effortless sovereignty of 49:22ff.

The competent Lord (50:2c–3)

The final ‘See’ of the series should be restored. In a particular way this matches the ‘See’ of 49:16, balancing God’s power with his love. The appeal to creation here is similar to that in Amos 4:13; 5:8f.; 9:5f. By his work in creation and his power over creation, the Lord is demonstrably able to do whatever he promises (or threatens). In creation is demonstrated, in particular, his power to effect dramatic changes: the sea dries; rivers become desert; the sky goes from light to darkness. Can such a God not equally transform the fortunes of his people? He dried up the Red Sea (Ex. 14); he turned the Nile to blood and its fish stank (Ex. 7:17–18); he visited Egypt with palpable darkness (Ex. 10:21) but gave his people light (Ex. 10:23). All this indicates God’s sovereign power, his mastery of hostile forces and his central concern for his people. No wonder words overflow here in indignant expostulation when the children of the exodus, the great redemption, refuse their Redeemer. Truly, to fail to respond leaves people without excuse.

The Sovereign Lord (50:4–11)

The third Servant Song (4–9) is autobiographical like the second, but unlike both its predecessors it contains no reference to the Servant. It is the attached comment (10–11) that reveals who the speaker was. This point is important. Moving from verses 1–3 to verse 4, we are aware only that in contradistinction to the ‘no man ... no-one’ of verse 2 there is after all someone who listens (4b), learns the will of God (5a), does not rebel (5b; cf. verse 1g), obeys at cost (6) and rests all the while in confident faith in the Sovereign Lord (7–9). Zion is unheeding of the Lord’s call (2), the Servant is ever a listener (4cd); Zion is unconvinced about the Lord’s love (49:14) and power (49:22), the Servant is confident in the Lord’s help (7a, 9a) and nearness (8a); Zion suffers for iniquity and rebellion (1fg), the Servant suffers because obedient (5f); Zion is charged with offences (1fg), the Servant knows no charge against him can be sustained at law (8–9). There is no single parallel or identity between the Servant and Zion; they are the many,

he is the one. The distinction between them has become a gulf.

Up to this point, only 49:7 has noted the Servant as sufferer. The distinctive feature of this Song is to elaborate the sufferings and to stress the obedience factor which provoked them.

The Song is divided into four sections by the title *The Sovereign LORD* in the emphatic position at the beginning of the line (4a, 5a, 7a, 9a).¹⁹ The sections have domino links—*ear(s)* (4d, 5a); *face* and *shame* (6cd, 7cd)—and a common forensic theme (7–8, 9). All four sections reveal the Sovereign Lord acting on behalf of his Servant. The first two show how he prepared the Servant for ministry and the second two how he stands by the Servant in adversity.

The responsive Servant (50:4–6)

The Servant with his *word* for *the weary* is plainly the prophetic figure of 42:1–4; 49:1–6; and 53:1–12, bringing revealed truth to the Gentiles with unassertive, gentle speech (42:2), incisive speech like a sharpened sword (49:2) and a pure mouth (53:7, 9). Behind the *word that sustains* (4ab), and explaining it, lies the discipline of daily hearing (4cd). Sovereignty figured significantly in the foregoing extended plea to Zion; in the thoughtlessly used title (49:14), the Lord's sovereign mastery of earthly kings (49:22f.) and the absolute power of *the Mighty One* (49:26). All this meant nothing to Zion; it means everything to the Servant (5, 7, 9). An *instructed tongue* is ‘the tongue of those who are taught’, ‘a disciple’s tongue’. ‘Taught’ (*limmûdîm*) is ‘disciples’ in 8:16. The Servant comes before us as the disciple *par excellence*. He was not endowed with an instant gift, *an instructed tongue*, but was subjected to the training procedures appropriate to all discipleship—concentration on the word of the Lord (as in 8:9–20).²⁰ To know the *word that sustains the weary* is ‘to know how to sustain the weary with a word’. *Sustains* ($\sqrt{\text{`ut}}$) is not found elsewhere and is open to question.²¹ The older translation, ‘to speak a word in

¹⁹ Isaiah uses the extended title *^adōnāy yahweh* occurs in 7:7; 25:8; 28:16; 30:15; 40:10; 48:16; 49:22; 50:4–5, 7, 9; 52:4; 56:8; 61:1, 11; 65:13, 15.

²⁰ Goldingay (*God's Prophet*, p. 134) notes the link with 8:16 but draws the strange conclusion that the use of the same word indicates that ‘the Isaiah of the exile’ sees himself as ‘a disciple of the earlier prophet’. This does not seem to be what verse 4 says.

²¹ North (*Second Isaiah*, p. 201) quotes a private communication of G. R. Driver that a possible

season', which derives a verb from the noun '*ēt* ('time, season'; 13:22), must not be discounted. Since, however, the derivation of the noun is itself uncertain we cannot affirm that it could not give rise to a denominative verb with this meaning. 'Nothing', says Delitzsch, 'indicates a tongue befitting the disciples of God so much as the gift of administering consolation'.²² *He wakens* is a continuous tense. As in the case of the conqueror (41:2, 25; 45:13), the primary impulse comes from the Lord, and his primary objective is to share his word. The object of the verb is *my ear*. Waking the ear involves, of course, waking *me*, but to add this pronoun obscures the divine objective: the awakened ear, ready to receive the word of God—the first mark of a disciple under instruction. The sharpened sword and the polished arrow (49:2) did not happen automatically or all at once. They were the products of prolonged attention, defined here as the discipleship of the *morning by morning* appointment with God. Not that the Servant imposed this discipline on himself, but he showed his discipleship by responding to the Lord's disciplined and regular approach to him. He is the second and true Adam who, when the Lord God came and called (cf. Gn. 3:8), was responsive and unashamed. The tongue filled with the appropriate word for ministry is the product of the ear filled with the word of God. *Like one/those' being taught* is *limmūdīm* (cf. 4a). The *morning by morning* appointment is not a special provision or demand related to the perfect Servant but is the standard curriculum for all disciples.

5 There came a moment in the sequence of morning instruction when a particular intimation of the Lord's will was granted and, equally a product of the morning discipleship, it was met by obedience. *Has opened* is better 'opened', referring to the specific occasion. For the imagery of opening the ear see 22:14; 2 Samuel 7:27 (both use $\sqrt{gālā}$, meaning 'to uncover, lay bare'); but here, peculiar to Isaiah, we have $\sqrt{pāṭah}$, used of opening a door; cf. 35:5; 48:8. This latter reference stands in surely deliberate contrast to the Servant. We are not told at this point what it was the Lord God called his Servant to do, only that the call was met by a total response of will (*not ... rebellious*, $\sqrt{mārā}$, maybe with an emphasis on the defiance of rebellion; cf. 1:20; 3:8; 30:9; Dt. 21:18ff.) and deed (*not drawn back*, $\sqrt{sūḡ}$, 'taking evasive action'; cf. 59:13; Ps. 80:18 <19>).

Arabic cognate means 'to incline (towards)' and therefore 'to console'. Westermann (p. 225) suggests *la'a-nōt* ('to know') but in the sense of a verb identically spelled meaning 'to care for'.

²² Delitzsch, p. 277.

6 As Smart says, ‘From verse 6 it becomes difficult to maintain that ... the Servant ... is no more than a personification [of Israel/the remnant]. The impression is conveyed strongly that there is some one man who actually felt the blows’.²³ The verbs may be perfects of determination, referring to the moment of revelation of the Servant’s vocation, ‘for my part I determined to offer ...’; or the Servant may be being portrayed as looking back on the whole experience. The fact, however, is of a revelation of suffering to come, bravely faced and endured in obedience to the Lord God. Not a suffering because of wrongdoing (as 42:24; 50:1) but through costly obedience; a suffering not merited but accepted, described in terms of the judicial act of flogging, gratuitous torture and personal humiliation. Isaiah does not name the Servant but offers a clue: where there is this threefold suffering, there is the Servant.

The competent Lord (50:7–9)

7 If the verbs in verse 6 are perfects of determination, then *helps* here must be translated ‘will help’, showing that commitment for the future (6) rests on confidence in God for the future (7). If verse 6 reviews the past, then *helps* must be ‘was helping me [throughout]’. Out of this confidence of help comes certainty of the outcome (‘therefore’ *I will not be disgraced*/‘end in confusion’) and resolute determination (*Therefore I have set my face like flint*) to carry things through to success (*I know I will not be put to shame*; cf. *mocking*/‘shame’ in verse 6). Both *disgraced* and *put to shame* go beyond embarrassment to the idea of ‘reaping shame’—finding what one asserted to be false, expressing a hope which was not fulfilled, acting in a confidence which proved baseless.

8 This verse pictures the coming contest between the Servant and his opponents as a trial at law, but it is more than a picture. We noted in 45:21 and 49:24–25 an emphasis on the maintenance of righteousness. This is applied also to the Servant: were his conduct to be tried at law, none could convict him of sin; before God and humankind he is without stain on his record. *Vindicates* is a forensic term meaning ‘brings in a verdict of innocence’: *He who vindicates me* is ‘the one who accounts me righteous’. *Near*²⁴ is parallel in meaning to *gō’ēl* (cf. Lv. 21:2f.; 25:25; Nu. 27:11; Ru. 2:20; 3:12). It means, therefore,

²³ Smart, p. 165.

²⁴ The adjective *qārōb* is mostly used of position in space (Gn. 19:20) or time (Nu. 24:17); of ‘neighbours’ (Ex. 32:27) and of being spiritually ‘near’ God (Lv. 10:3).

not just the near presence of the Lord consoling, but the Lord actively participating as Next-of-kin; not ‘the Lord is with me’ but ‘the Lord is on my side’. On *bring charges* see *contend* in 49:25. *Face each other* means to meet in court, and *accuser*/‘master of my judgment’ refers to the process of proving to be master in a legal suit.

9 The forensic setting continues but the emphasis changes. In verse 8 the Servant was confident of the verdict going his way, he is equally confident of the rout of his opponents. The identical words *the Sovereign LORD [who] helps* are emphasized here by an initial ‘Behold’ (omitted by the NIV), repeated before *They will all wear out* in a ‘look at this ... now look at that’ contrast. Since the Lord God *helps*, no charge stands. The thought is not that the Sovereign protects his favourite but that the Lord’s willingness to be Next-of-kin to the Servant is proof of his righteousness and the rightness of his cause before divine judgment. What earthly contender can then possibly succeed? *Condemn*/‘prove me guilty’ is the opposite, in forensic terminology, to ‘account me righteous’ (8a). The accusers are compared to the internal transience of a garment that just wears out and the helplessness of inert material before its natural external predator, *the moths* (cf. 51:6, 8; Ps. 39:11 <12>).

The Servant and the remnant (50:10–11)

Like all the Songs, this third one is followed by a tailpiece. In the first two Songs the tailpieces were divine confirmations of the Servant’s task; in this and in the final Song (52:13–53:12) the tailpieces are exhortations to respond to the Servant—here, by accepting him as a model. These verses match the teaching of 8:9–20 in opening a gulf between two classes of people: those who model themselves on the Servant (10) and those who walk in the way of self-sufficiency (11). Each verse has six lines, and together they contrast two classes and two ways of life. Both ‘walk’, the one in darkness (10c), the other in a self-kindled light (11c). The one has no gleam of light (10d), the other is surrounded by the torches he has lit (11bd). The one leans on God (10f), the other lies down in torment (11f). No particular outcome or blessing is promised as a result of the way of obedience and trust (10bef), but the implication is that those who follow it escape ‘lying down in torment’ under divine disapproval. Thus, the Servant is not only their mentor (10b) but also, by implication, their Saviour. As to the Servant’s identity, he cannot himself be a personification of the believing, trusting remnant, for he is offered here objectively to them as their teacher and the one through whom they learn what it is to

fear the Lord. Fear was a particular mark of the remnant in 8:12f., just as darkness was the lot of those who refused the Lord's word and way (8:22). They were called to concentrate on the given word (8:16, 20), just as here they listen to the Servant (10b), and to rest in faith (8:17; 10ef).

10 On *fears* and *obeys*/‘listens to’ (cf. Lk. 9:35) see Exodus 20:18–20. The place and status of the Servant is such that it is now by listening to him that reverence to God is displayed and passes into action. *Let him before who walks* should be deferred until *trust in the name of the LORD*. To walk in darkness and have no light is part of the description of the one who fears and hears. Those who commit themselves to the Servant-way will have a Servant-experience, normative for them because true of him. It is not an indication that they have missed the will of God but is, as for the Servant, intrinsic to the life of obedience. *Light* is ‘gleam’ or ‘flash’, i.e. there is not even a spark in the darkness. His *name* is all that the Lord has revealed himself to be; it was in the darkness of Egyptian bondage that he brought the meaning of his name to them (Ex. 3:13–15). He is a God for just such a time! Only in 10:20 does Isaiah use the verb *rely*/‘lean’ in the sense of resting on God, and there also it refers to the remnant. *His God* corresponds to *my God* in 49:4d, 5f.

11 Those who continue in their own way, dealing with life’s darkness by a ‘do-it-yourself’ remedy, are doomed. How true it is to this life that those who trust walk in darkness and those who are self-sufficient walk in light! *Provide yourselves with* is an unfortunate translation of ‘gird yourselves with’. To ‘gird on’ armour is to prepare for battle; to be ‘girded’ with joy (Ps. 30:11 <12>) is to be equipped to enter into joyful experience. The picture here is of people seeking to equip themselves, out of earthly resources, to deal with earth’s dark experiences. They feel the need of nothing they cannot generate for themselves. *Flaming torches* is a good interpretation of *zîqôt*, which is found only here in the feminine form (the masculine form appears in Pr. 26:18); it means flashes or flames of fire, firebrands. *Torment* (*ma^aṣēbâ*) is found only here, but see √*‘aṣēb* (e.g. 63:10), with a meaning of grief, pain, displeasure, specifically the pains of sin under the curse of God (Gn. 3:16–17; 5:29).

4. Salvation in prospect and reality (51:1–52:12)

Mounting excitement characterizes this section: ‘The prophet’s thoughts ... and his high-strung emotion find vent in short, impassioned oracles’.²⁵ Of the eight oracles, the

first three are linked by their initial call to listen ([51:1, 4, 7](#)) with, in each case, a double description of those addressed. In these the Lord promises a coming salvation. The last three oracles are linked by their initial double imperatives ([51:17; 52:1, 11](#)), in each case commanding people to awake to a new situation which the Lord has brought about. The two intermediate oracles consist of a bold command to the ‘arm of the LORD’ to awake ([51:9–11](#)) and a meditative message of reassurance ([51:12–16](#)). The call to the Lord to awake ([51:9](#)) forms the bridge between the two sets of three oracles. The foregoing promises have roused a longing for their fulfilment—hence the cry to the Lord for action. But the Lord’s reply is dramatic: ‘You call me to perform works of salvation, but it is rather for you to wake up to what I have already done: the day of salvation has dawned’ ([51:17; 52:1, 11](#)). And then, as if to answer the unspoken question how all this has happened, ‘Look, my servant ...’ ([52:13](#)).

Commands to listen: promises of salvation (51:1–8)	Appeal and reassurance (51:9–16)	Commands to respond: experience of salvation (51:17)
Comfort for Zion (1–3)		The cup of wrath (17–23)
Eden restored (3)		The end of wrath (22)
World revelation: eternal salvation (4–6)	Appeal (9–11)	Holy Zion: universal salvation (52:1–10)
My people (4)		My people (6)
The arm of the Lord (5)	The arm of the Lord (9)	The arm of the Lord (10)
		Universal salvation (10)

²⁵ Skinner, p. 105.

Eternal salvation: human
transiency (7–8)

Comfort (12–16)

The greater exodus (11–12)

Why fear man? (7–8)

Why fear man? (12)

Departure without fear (12)

Other lines of connection bind the section together: comfort (51:3, 12; 52:9); Zion's joy (51:3; 52:9); Creator and creation (51:6, 10, 13, 15–16); the fury of the oppressor (51:13; 52:5). Throughout, Isaiah is drawing on motifs suggested by the fall of Jerusalem, exile and Babylon (51:3, 7, 18–20; 52:5, 11), but he names no names, remaining faithful to the change of theme introduced at 48:22–49:1. His concern is the return of the people to the Lord and his attention is throughout caught by spiritual, not political, realities.

a. *Commands to listen, promises of salvation (51:1–8)*

There is an easy progress from chapter 50 into chapter 51. 51:1 addresses those whose lives are characterized by pursuing righteousness and seeking the Lord; verse 7 reveals their minds (they 'know righteousness') and their hearts (they are indwelt by the Lord's law). In other words, they are the believing remnant who expressed their reverence for the Lord by submitting their minds to, and modelling their lives on, the word of the Servant and following him in the way of faith (50:10). At first sight verse 4 seems to address a wider audience. This may be its intention; the news of eternal salvation is for all, not just the committed fellowship. On the other hand, it would be more consistent with the movement of Isaiah's thought to equate 'my people' and 'my nation' with the remnant, for the mass of people have lost their right to these great titles (48:1–2). Seen like this, the three oracles form a sequence. The first (1–3) makes promises to Zion, but promises which, with their Abrahamic and Edenic orientations, have implications wider than Zion. The second (4–6) reveals the true extent of the promises, they are for the world; and the third (7–8) asserts that no power can prevent the Lord's righteous and saving purposes from being fulfilled. All three sections have in common the topic of 'righteousness' (1a, 5a, 6g, 7a, 8c; the first, second and fourth are the masculine form of the word; the third and fifth are the feminine). Verses 1a and 7a have the same verb 'to hear' ($\sqrt{\text{šāma'}}$); a different verb ($\sqrt{\text{qāšab}}$) occurs in verse 4. Verses 1c, 2a and 6ab share

commands to ‘look’, the first two and the last being $\sqrt{nābat}$.

Zion renewed, Eden restored (51:1–3)

Like the three oracles in this section, this opening poem is marked by doublets: *pursue/seek* (1ab); *rock/quarry* (1cd); *Abraham/Sarah* (2ab); *blessed/made many* (2d); *comfort/compassion* (3ab); *deserts/wastelands*, *Eden/garden* (3cd); *joy/gladness, thanksgiving/singing* (3ef). The thrust of the oracle is to foster faith by recollection of how the Lord acted and blessed in the past and, therefore, encourage waiting in faith for the blessings still to come.

A¹ Listening: a voice to hear (1ab)

B¹ The rock that became a multitude (1c–2b)

C Explanation: divine blessing (2cd)

B² The wastelands that will become Eden (3a–d)

A² Singing: a voice to raise (3ef)

1 *Me* is identified in verse 2c as the Lord who called Abraham. *Righteousness* is every aspect of the life that is ‘right with God’. *Seek* (cf. Dt. 4:29) is not searching as for something lost but coming with all the determination of a concerned seeker to where *the LORD* is known to be.

2 When Isaac was born *Abraham* was as good as dead and Sarah, as far as childbearing was concerned, was actually dead. From this unpromising beginning the Lord produced the sons, nations and kings he had promised (Gn. 17:3–7). Hence the chosen illustration of an inanimate beginning in stone is very apt. Whatever potential may be there, it is not inherent life or any power of growth. To refer to Abraham without Sarah would not sufficiently underline human helplessness; to refer to Sarah without Abraham would lack explicit reference to the promise of which Abraham was the bearer. The initial ‘For’ before *when I called* should be restored; here is the reason for the command to *Look* (2a). This verse speaks of the purpose of God in his call, the transforming power of God in the blessing and the divine energizing whereby *one* without hope of increase became *many*.²⁶ This is the great principle of the past, which is the seed of hope for the future.

²⁶ Altering *wa^abēhū* (imperfect with simple waw) to waw consecutive has been suggested (BHS), but it is preferable to leave the text unchanged. The simple imperfect is used to impart vividness to single past actions (see GKC 107b; Driver, 27a, 84a). Alternatively, the form here is exactly as in

3 Once more, the initial ‘For’, introducing the reason for the historical retrospect of verses 1–2, should be restored. Perfects of certainty (the Lord has determined to *comfort*, to *look with compassion* and to *make*)²⁷ guarantee Zion a future on the analogy of Abraham and Sarah. Their hopelessness matches Zion’s *ruins*; the divine action which *blessed* them will *make* Zion’s new future; the *one* who became *many* will be matched by the *ruins* which will become *Eden*. *Like Eden* is not simply a figure of beauty and plenty but also one of the absence of the divine curse consequent upon sin. The edict whereby God’s fair creation became productive of thorns and thistles (Gn. 3:18) has been revoked and the way opened for wastelands to become places of joy (11:6–9; 35:1).

Revelation to the world: eternal salvation (51:4–6)

A particular importance of this oracle is that it integrates the present series into the developing revelation of the person and work of the Servant. First, it contains many reminiscences of the first Song: the concepts of *justice* and *light* are common (4d, 5c; cf. 42:1, 3–4, 6); the Lord describes as *my righteousness* (5–6) the universal work which 42:6 said he was doing ‘in righteousness’, i.e. the calling and work of the Servant; both verse 6 and 42:5 appeal to the created order (in 42:5 the Lord’s universal authority and power as Creator is the background for what he is going to do through his Servant; here the transitory universe is a foil for eternal salvation). Secondly, the *arm* of the Lord is reintroduced in verse 5 (cf. 40:10–11; 48:14) as a motif of personal divine action (Ex. 6:6; 15:16; cf. Is. 30:30). This prepares for 51:9, a call for a new-exodus activity of the Lord; for 52:10, where the Lord’s arm is bared for universal revelation of saving power; and for 53:1, where we meet the arm of the Lord in person (cf. 59:16; 62:8; 63:5, 12). This backward and forward look to the Servant places these passages in their intended context, opening up as they do aspects of what the Lord plans to do through his Servant and bringing us ever nearer the summons of 52:13. The stylistic feature of ‘doublets’ continues: in verse 4 we have *listen/hear*; *people/nation*; *law/justice*; in verse 5, *righteousness/salvation*; *nations/islands*; ‘arms’/*arm*; and in verse 6, *lift up/look*;

Gn. 12:2 and may have been deliberately used for that reason.

²⁷ The Hebrew uses ‘comfort’ twice (‘comfort Zion ... comfort ... her ruins’), but the NIV destroys this recollection of the double ‘comfort’ of 40:1 by arbitrarily translating ‘compassion’.

heavens/earth; salvation/righteousness. The double command to look (1, 2, 6) and the word ‘righteousness’ (1, 5–6) link this second poem with the first (1–3). Once more the poem here has a focal point:

A¹ Summons to hear (4ab)

B¹ Light for the peoples, salvation speeding (4c–5b)

C The arm of the Lord (5c–e)

A² Summons to look (6ab)

B² The world’s inhabitants transitory, salvation eternal (6c–f)

The central truth in the first poem, the blessing of God (2cd), the secret ingredient in the history of Israel, is replaced by the ‘arm’ of the Lord, the divine personal act which will effectuate salvation.

4 On *my people ... my nation* see the introduction to this section. The word translated *nation* (*lə'ôm*) is used in the plural as a general word for ‘peoples’,²⁸ but apart from Proverbs 11:26 and 14:28 it appears elsewhere only in the singular in Gn. 25:23, where it distinguishes the Jacob line and the Esau line in the descendants of Isaac. Isaiah is probably recalling this reference to make the point that within the total people there are the true people, and to these is addressed the word of speedy and eternal salvation. They *pursue/seek* ‘righteousness’ (1), and the message that *righteousness* is *near* (5) is specially relevant to them. The initial ‘For’ before *the law* should be restored. The words *law* and *justice* hold two passages, respectively 2:3 (cf. 1:10) and 42:1–4, together in the present half-verse (revealed truth as taught and decided by God). *Will become* [possibly ‘I will make to rest as ...’] *a light to the nations* is equivalent to ‘establishing’ divine truth in the earth (cf. 42:4).²⁹

5 On the human side, *righteousness*, conformity with the character and claims of God, is the mark of the true people. On the divine side, righteousness is the quality of all that

²⁸ For *lə'ummîm* in Isaiah see 17:12–13; 34:1; 41:1; 43:4, 9; 49:1; 55:4; 60:2.

²⁹ ‘Cause to rest’ is both possible and suitable, but the RSV prefers to alter the punctuation, making ‘*argîa*’ the first word of verse 5 and treating it adverbially as ‘in a twinkling’ (cf. C. H. Toy, *Proverbs*, ICC (Clark, 1899) on Pr. 12:19). Westermann emends to *reğâa*‘ (‘in a moment/suddenly’). But if alteration is necessary it would be better to emend the first word of verse 5 and achieve the stylish ‘*argîa*’ *aqrîb* (‘I will soon bring near’).

the Lord does, whether for his people ([49:25](#); [51:5–6](#), [8](#), [22](#); [54:14](#)) or for his Servant ([50:8](#)), or what the Servant does ([53:11](#); [54:17](#)). Here, *righteousness* and *salvation* are parallel; the latter being what the Lord does; the former, the quality of that which infills it. The saving work satisfies every standard of the Lord's righteous nature, meets every legal claim and discharges every debt before the eternal law. The tendency to offer translations like 'deliverance' (RSV) must be resisted. There is no instance that actually demands such a translation, but the real problem is that what is essentially a description of the character of God is turned into a description of his acts. Righteousness infills all that he does because that is what he is. *Salvation* has a wide Old Testament ambience. The root idea may be 'spaciousness' and hence, politically, a leading out into liberty ([Jdg. 2:16](#), [18](#)); religiously the meaning runs deeper. According to [12:1–3](#), salvation is linked with the turning away of divine wrath and the exercise of trust, leading to fearlessness, joy and strength in God, and perpetual blessings depicted as wells available to the saved to draw from. The sequence is the same here: from the Edenic removal of the divine curse to joy ([3](#)) and now to salvation (cf. the parallel [51:22](#); [52:10](#)). In a way that fully satisfies absolute *righteousness* there will be *salvation*, an end of divine wrath, an entrance by faith upon divine comfort, strength and joy.

My arm is 'my arms'. Why would Isaiah use the plural here? It may be a plural of amplitude, pledging the fulness of divine personal action to the task, or a recollection of [Deuteronomy 33:27](#) (the only other place where the plural is used referring to the Lord), i.e. what was formerly the privilege of Israel alone is now destined for the whole world.³⁰ More likely, however, the plural is used as a deliberate counterpoise to the singular *my arm* at the end of the verse. 'The arm of the LORD' is a figure of special significance in [48:14–55:13](#), and the unexpected plural, while pledging the plenitude of his power on behalf of the world, prompts the question, what special divine activity is intended by the singular? In this way Isaiah prepares for the special revelation of the Servant as the 'arm of the LORD' in [53:1](#). The fulness of divine power will come in the individuality of the divine person. *Justice* (as in [42:1–4](#)) is a settled divine truth. On *islands* see [11:11](#);

³⁰ A. D. H. Mayes (*Deuteronomy*, NCB (Oliphants, 1979), p. 397) notes that the collection of sayings in [Dt. 33](#) must have been in existence 'some considerable time before its incorporation in its present place in Deuteronomy'. Whatever date is accepted for Deuteronomy, Isaiah could have had this reference in mind.

[40:15](#); [42:4](#). *Look to*/‘wait for’ and *hope* are a reference to [42:4](#), showing that the work of the Servant is in mind and is now imminent. In what sense does the world so wait and hope? In every age there are those, like Cornelius ([Acts 10](#)), who grasp with eager desire after greater light, but at a deeper level such a longing for something better, a truly human life, is implicit and inarticulate in the groanings and travailings under which people live out their lives (the ‘eager expectation’ of the creation; [Rom. 8:19](#)). All such longings, every inadequacy that life exhibits, will be met by the Servant, *my arm*.

6 Having reviewed the universality of the Lord’s righteous salvation ([4–5](#)), Isaiah now turns to its eternity. Biblical thought always recognized the transience of the created order as such ([Ps. 102:25f.](#) <[26f.](#)>) and its dramatic termination at the eschatological day ([34:4](#)). Thus the most durable things in our experience fade and flee but not so salvation. The double command here *to lift up* and *look* does not indicate the start of a new poem because (in contrast to verses [1](#), [4–7](#)) those to whom it is addressed are not named. The initial ‘For’ before *the heavens* should be restored to explain the command—how durable the heavens look, how obsolescent they are! *Vanish* ($\sqrt{mālah}$, ‘to be dispersed, fall to bits’) is found only here. A dense column of smoke rises, holds together for a while in seeming solidity, but then breaks into drifting patches and so vanishes. To *wear out like a garment* is to be essentially evanescent, succumbing to one’s own transience. *Like flies* is more probably simply ‘in like manner’.³¹ The most obvious and distressing obsolescence is what we find in ourselves. A simple reference to human mortality is more effective than the simile of flies. On *salvation* and *righteousness* see verse [5](#). Salvation’s durability is in its constitution (*last* is lit. ‘be’). *Never fail* is ‘will not be shattered’. The negative reinforces the positive ‘be’ and also alludes (by a different verb) to the ‘falling to bits’ ([6c](#)) of the seemingly solid universe and, in particular, notes that no external force can destroy what the Lord is going to do.

Eternal salvation: a call to fearlessness ([51:7–8](#))

This third poem is integrated into the series by sharing a matching call with the first poem ([1](#), [7](#)). It continues the theme of righteousness ([1](#), [5](#), [6](#), [8](#)); its concluding lines

³¹ The MT’s *k^emô kēn*, supposedly from Arabic, to mean ‘like [a swarm of] locusts’. BHS adopts this. But the MT’s ‘in like manner’, with its simple assertion that transitoriness infects the whole created order, certainly has a feel of rightness about it.

(8cd) recapitulate the conclusion of the second poem (6fg); the garment simile reappears (6d, 8a); and *terrified* (7d) is the word translated ‘fail’ in verse 6g. The distinctive theme of the poem is its development of the parallel between the Servant and the believing remnant. He too faced charges levelled against him (50:8) but reminded himself of the essential frailty of those who would condemn him (50:9). Like him, those with the Lord’s teaching in their hearts (7) will face *reproach* (insults aimed at them because of their faithfulness) and must be prepared for a life of perseverance, holding, believably on to the eternal significance of their salvation from the Lord (cf. 2 Cor. 4:16–18). Opposition comes with a terrifying appearance of strength and endlessness, but to yield to it means leaving the eternal for the temporary.

A¹ Righteousness known (7ab)

B¹ Opposition faced (7cd)

B² Opposition exposed (8ab)

A² Righteousness eternal (8cd)

7 *Know what is right* is (lit.) ‘know righteousness’. When Isaiah accused his people of being ‘far from righteousness’ (46:12), the charge ran deeper than that they were deviant in conduct and was rather that they were far from God, lacking in themselves that quality of being which can come only from a personal relationship with the righteous God and from sharing the life that is distinctively his. Thus also verse 1 parallels ‘pursuing righteousness’ with ‘seeking the Lord’. ‘Knowing righteousness’ goes far beyond ‘knowing what is right’. It is not merely conforming or consenting to the will of God but denotes intimate union with the totally righteous life of God (the full significance of the verb ‘to know’; Gn. 4:1, NIV ‘lay with’). The parallel ‘in whose heart is my teaching’³² carries the idea forward. The *heart* is the centre and fount of personality (Pr. 4:23). 50:10 implied that those who identify with the Servant will share his experiences. This is the core of this third poem. Great things lie ahead (3, 4–5, 6, 8) but the interim is not easy. It is not what they do but what they are which excites hostility and calls for endurance (Mk. 13:13). Isaiah uses four words of rising intensity: *fear* is the emotion kindled by the prospect of *reproach* (‘taunt’, ‘scorn’); *terrified*, however, means ‘shat-

³² Verse 7b has the familiar change from second person vocative (7a) to third person appositional vocative, imparting greater emphasis to what is said.

tered' or 'broken', reduced to immobility, going into a state of shock before *insults*. The noun *insults* in its present form occurs only here but is closely cognate to 43:28 and Zephaniah 2:8. The verb ($\sqrt{gādāp}$) occurs only once of verbal hostility to human beings (Ps. 44:16 <17>), and its seven other occurrences concern blasphemy against God. *Men* ('*nôš*) is characteristically used of humankind in its mortal weakness.

8 The true people of God live by the faith which recognizes that the things which are seen are temporal and the things which are not seen are eternal (2 Cor. 4:18). At the heart of opposition, no matter how violent it may grow against God and his people, lies ceaseless and effective (even if imperceptible) forces of destruction, acting like *moth* and *worm*/‘grub’. *Eat* and *devour* are the same verb twice in the Hebrew ('eat ... eat') a telling repetitive emphasis. On *righteousness* and *salvation* see verse 5. *Last* is 'be' (see verse 6g). *For ever* expresses the intrinsic permanence of the Lord's righteous salvation, *through all generations*, its perpetuation within human experience.

b. Appeal and reassurance (51:9–16)

The threefold summons to the remnant to hear (1, 4, 7) gives place to a peremptory call (9–11) to the *arm of the LORD*, an excited appeal that what the Lord has promised he will do (cf. the appeal at 45:8 following 45:1–7). Whether we hear the voice of the prophet or the voice of the remnant is not important, though in context the latter seems more likely. The heart of the matter is that the proper response to divine promises is to pray for their fulfilment, and if the prayer borders on irreverence (9; cf. Ps. 44:23 <24>) this betokens only an urgent longing that the blessed future should dawn at once. Regarding verses 12–16, internal problems of interpretation do not blur the meaning: comfort (12a); the power of the Creator over mortal human beings (12b–13); the release of those under sentence of death (14); and the Lord's sovereignty (15), overshadowing hand (16ab), universal purpose (16cd) and central commitment to Zion (16e). Their urgency (9–11) is met by his calm reassurance (12–16).

‘The arm of the LORD’: exodus past and future (51:9–11)

Four elements in these verses point to the exodus as the past event referred to: (i) the making of a *road in the depths* echoes the Red Sea experience; (ii) *the redeemed*, when it refers to a past experience, describes those who came out of Egypt; (iii) the only historical event which prefigures eschatological redemption is the exodus (Ezk. 20:33f.); (iv) *Rahab* is used as a code-name for Egypt. Isaiah 30:7 uses the name Rahab in a way which