

1. The first cycle of oracles. The reality of the Lord's promises (13:1–20:6)

The preceding section (chapters 6–12) painted a Zion-centred picture of history and the present chapters seek to justify this in the actual historical situation. In particular, the divine procedures for ordering history stated in 10:5–15 are demonstrated in practice. The whole cycle takes the principles, blessings and warnings of chapters 7–11 on to the next stage, in particular seeking to affirm that the Lord is really and truly ruling history and guiding it to his predetermined end. Throughout, Isaiah deals with the present, the impending and the eschatological. For example, in the Babylon oracle, although Babylon is addressed as a present power, the setting of the whole is eschatological (there are references to a gathering of the Lord's forces [13:2–3], a universal objective [verse 5], the day of the Lord [verses 6–8] and cosmic as well as world-wide results [verses 9–11]). In case the remote should appear unreal, Isaiah offers an interim fulfilment for which people can watch and which, when they see it, will guarantee that the greater purpose will also come to pass. The interim fulfilment is the overthrow of Assyria, which is an earnest that the hand which mastered Assyria masters the earth (14:24–27). In the series as a whole, now one of these elements and now another is stressed, but Isaiah is specially concerned to offer interim fulfilments (along with 14:24–27, see 16:13–14 and 20:1–6). This is of some importance for if God cannot demonstrate his management of history in what people see before them, why should they trust him for what they cannot see? Faith is not a leap in the dark but conviction reached on the basis of evidence. But if they actually live through what is demonstrably a work of God, they are without excuse if they withhold belief regarding coming days and the day of the Lord itself. Prediction and fulfilment provide the required demonstration, as in the case of the Assyrian overthrow. Before the event, Isaiah made a commitment in the name of the Lord about what had not yet happened (and, indeed, what was self-evidently against the odds). It is the nexus between the prior word and the later event that shows who rules the world. This gives confidence regarding that which is equally the subject of prediction and is yet to be the subject of action.

a. Babylon: appearance and reality in world history (13:1–14:27)

This oracle is a mosaic of seven pieces:

1. The title, giving subject and author ([13:1](#)).
2. The day of the Lord, with no overt reference to Babylon. This is an oracle datable to any point in Isaiah's ministry ([13:2–16](#)).
3. The overthrow of Babylon by the Medes ([13:17–22](#)).
4. A connecting piece, possibly an editorial composition designed to provide a new integration for the other units in the complex. Its opening 'For' (omitted by the NIV) explains the Lord's motivation in history ([14:1–4a](#)).
5. A mocking song, introduced by verses [3–4a](#), about the king of Babylon and a meditation on human vanity ([14:4b–21](#)).
6. Divine hostility to Babylon, matching section 3 (cf. verse [23](#) with [14:21–22](#)), ([14:22–23](#)).
7. The overthrow of Assyria 'in my land', an interim fulfilment exemplifying divine sovereign rule ([14:24–27](#)).

As with all of Isaiah's mosaics, this diverse material has been brought into a new unity:

A¹ The day of the Lord: the beckoning hand, a universal purpose declared ([13:2–16](#))

B¹ The overthrow of Babylon: the end of the kingdom, the fact of divine overthrow ([13:17–22](#))

C The security and future of the Lord's people: a contrasting universal purpose ([14:1–2](#))

B² The overthrow of Babylon: the end of the king, the explanation of divine overthrow ([14:3–23](#))

A²The end of Assyrian power: the outstretched hand, a universal purpose exemplified and validated ([14:24–27](#))

A¹ and A² raise the question of the locus of power in history. The appearance of things is the exercise of power by human will; the reality is the exercise of sovereign rule by the will of God. The human mind cannot always trace out the course of the divine purposes, and often the believing mind cannot but agree that everything looks a terrifying mess. But beyond that comes the 'nevertheless' which only faith can speak: all is in the hand of God. B¹ and B² stress the moral dimension in the purposes of God. They contrast the appearance of human glory with the reality of human emptiness and expose the worm in the bud: the pride which invites and merits divine judgment. To all this there is a

common hub (C): consideration of the care of the people of God. The power that gathers nations ([13:2–5](#)), overthrows kingdoms ([13:17–19](#)), breaks kings ([14:5f.](#)) and ends empires ([14:24f.](#)) is a power of compassion to the church. It is allied to a divine world-view whereby *aliens* become Israelites ([14:1b](#)), Gentile peoples co-operate in the Lord's purposes ([14:1b, 2a](#)) and the captor-captive roles are reversed ([14:2b](#)).

Introduction ([13:1](#))

An *oracle* (*maśšā*) means a ‘lifting up (of the voice)’, a declaration.⁸ *Babylon* looms large in this section of Isaiah as both the historical city and empire and as the ancient locus of arrogant self-sufficiency ([Gn. 11:1ff.](#)). In Isaiah’s time it was far from being a mere provincial town within the Assyrian Empire.⁹ Under the vigorous Merodach-Baladan (see on [39:1ff.](#)) it constituted a major threat to the Assyrian overlord and, politically speaking, a Babylonian Empire in Isaiah’s lifetime was a real probability. The circumstances of the Babylonian delegation ([39:1–7](#); c. 702) demanded that Isaiah speak some word and, for all we know, it was at this point that the problem of [6:11–12](#) was solved.

Isaiah had known from the start of his ministry that Judah would be deported. He came to know that Assyria would not accomplish this but that, to the contrary, Assyria’s threat to Zion would in fact mark the beginning of the decline of the empire.¹⁰ Maybe [39:6–7](#) was the first time he was able to give a name to the dark power whose destined task he had then known for thirty years. Of course, once he had named Babylon as the destroyer he would be under pressure to say more. It is unrealistic to think that the discipleship group would not press him ([8:9ff.](#)), needing to know how the promises of God would fare when, under an even greater threat than Assyria, Jerusalem itself fell to the foe. Such an enquiry would not be mere curiosity about the future; it would be essential to faith since it touched on the reliability of the promises by which the remnant lived. Circumstances thus compelled Isaiah to include Babylon in his thinking and preaching. We need not hesitate, therefore, over the ascription *that Isaiah ... saw* (cf. [1:1](#); [2:1](#)). The implication of this note of authorship is that [13:1–14:27](#) achieved some sort of contempo-

⁸ *maśšā*’ can mean ‘burden’ ([Ex. 23:5](#)) but there seems to be no thought of a prophet ‘burdened’ with a message here.

⁹ See Erlandsson.

¹⁰ See [10:24–34](#); [29:1–8](#); [30:27–33](#); [31:4f.](#)

rary publication or circulation—a not unreasonable thought in the light of chapter 39 and the notoriety accorded to the Babylonian delegation and the shocking thing Isaiah had said.

The day of the Lord: universal purpose declared (13:2–16)

Isaiah stands within the Amos tradition of the day of the Lord (*cf. Am. 5:18–20*), and what he depicts matches what he says elsewhere.¹¹ There is, however, here a notable balancing of divine and human agency (*cf. 22:5–6*). The conflict is universal with neither one side nor the other as the Lord's weapon (1–5). Rather, the conflict as such is of his promoting and the armies are his instruments against each other. In a word, the culmination of history rests on the principles of 10:5–15. At that day all the inherent destructiveness of sin, hitherto manifested in every individual act of animosity and every single act of war, will reach an unprecedented violence of mutual destruction. But over it all there is the presidency of a supreme Lord and moral governor of the world. There is a description of the summons to a holy war (2–3) and the mustering of a world-wide army (4–5), the terror this inspires (6–8) and the moral purpose in it all (9–13). It will be a day without escape (14–16).

2 *Raise, shout* and *beckon* are all second person plurals, creating the impression that the Lord has his agents posted and ready to signal the muster for the last battle. The *banner* symbolizes divine direction of history (*cf. 5:26*). The same idea in 11:10–12 expresses the final gathering to God of his world-wide people. At that day these two functions will be synchronized. The *hilltop* is *bare* in order to secure visibility. *Beckon* is (lit.) ‘wave a hand’ and the reference to ‘hand’ here should not be lost as it is part of the inclusio of the whole section (*cf. 14:26–27*). See also *nations* (verse 4 and 14:26), *mountains* (verse 4 and 14:25) and ‘the whole world’ (not *lands*; verse 5 and 14:26). *Nobles* (*nādīb*) can be a term of moral approval (*e.g. 32:8*) but it is also used of ‘the nobility’, leaders in general. ‘Entering the gates’ might describe the purpose of the war, to overthrow cities (*cf. 28:6b*), but probably here refers to the host assembling for enrolment at the nearest seat of government.

3 I is emphatic—‘As for me, I ...’. The Lord’s recruiting sergeants (2) have been posted

¹¹ Cf. 13:1, 13 with 24:21; 13:7–8 with 2:10, 19, 21; 24:17–18; 13:9, 11 with 24:5, 20; 25:10–12; 13:6 with 24:4.

in consequence of a divine decision. Note the continuing emphasis of *my holy ones*, *warriors*, *wrath* and *triumph*. *My holy ones* refers not to sanctity of character but to status, as set apart for a divine service, the ‘holy war’ (Dt. 20; 23:9 <10> ; 1 Sa. 21:5). *Warriors* (*gibbôrîm*; cf. 9:6 <7>) describes their prowess for the task in hand, *to carry out my wrath* (‘*ap*; cf. 10:5). *Who rejoice in my triumph* is a dubious translation of *ga’awâ*. It means (lit.) ‘my exulting ones of arrogance’ as at 9:9 <8> (for the same thought see 10:12). The Lord calls them *my* not because he approves their arrogance but because, in all their arrogance, he owns them and directs the overflowings of their arrogance to his own ends.

4 Isaiah is drawing on traditional terminology depicting Zion as beset on all sides by enemies.¹² This was often true historically and it was also ideologically true; the distinctiveness of the people of God made them an object of hostility to the surrounding world. It would be pre-eminently the case in the day of the Lord. Hence *mountains* is to be understood as the mountains surrounding Jerusalem, where the sound of the gathering forces would be heard. The *Almighty*/‘of hosts’ (*s̄ebā’ôt*) who is in himself every potentiality and power (see 1:9), includes within the sphere of his sovereignty all the powers of the world and their armies (*sābā’*). They gather at his command to do his bidding (cf. Acts 4:27f.).

5 This verse includes both the notions of the world-embracing sway of the Lord and also of world involvement in the last battle, the gathering to the battleground of every force the world knows. For *wrath* (*za’am*) see on 10:5. *The whole country* is a possible translation but contextually unsuitable. This is no national disaster but one embracing ‘the whole world’ (cf. the identical words in 14:26).

The two sections, verses 6–8 and 9–13, pick up the themes respectively of verses 4 and 5. The awesome forces (4) about to clash melt people’s hearts with *terror* (6–8), but the reason behind it all is *wrath* (5) against sinners (9), *evil, sins, arrogance* and *pride* (11).

6 For *Wail* cf. Amos 5:16f. *Near* (*qārōb*) is ‘close by’ rather than ‘imminent’.¹³ It speaks not of necessary proximity in time or necessary tarrying but of the total preparedness of that day to dawn whenever the Lord declares that the time has come. *Destruction from the Almighty* is another lovely Isaianic assonance (*šōd mišsaddāy*). The title *šaddāy*,

¹² Cf. Pss. 46:3<4>, 6<7>; 65:7<8>; 83:2–3.

¹³ Cf. Joel 1:15; 2:1; 3:14<4:14>; Ob. 15; Zp. 1:7, 14.

found characteristically in the patriarchal narratives, is used there contextually for the God who is of power to keep his promises. His power does not flag like that of human beings, and he is at his most able when they are at their most impotent.¹⁴ Here, therefore, the title refers to the God who can do whatever he wills.

7 The *hands* and the *heart* are the organs of personal action and reflection, the outer and the inner, hence totality. Paralysed by the terrors of the day, people will neither be able to act nor plan. For *melt* see on 10:18.

8 *Terror will seize them*/‘And they will be terrified’ is a single word in Hebrew. The very brevity of statement enhances the grim reality of what it describes.¹⁵ The picture of a *woman in labour* is not a simile of fruitful pain here but of that which is sudden, inevitable and inescapable; the end result of a process that cannot now be stopped (cf. 1 Thes. 5:2–3). *Look aghast* ($\sqrt{tāmāh}$) ‘expresses in general the attitude of a person who is struck dumb by stupefaction’.¹⁶ It does not mean, then, ‘aghast with fear’, but bereft of all certainty, in a state of confusion and indecision; they are baffled to know where to turn. Commenting on *Their faces aflame*/‘faces of flame their faces’, Oswalt says, ‘They will stare at each other in an agony of both indecision and recognition’—their recognition of having trusted in the wrong resources bringing belated shame, making their faces flame with embarrassment. Kaiser suggests ‘sweat with fear’.

9 See on verses 6–13 above. For *cruel*/‘savage’ (*'akzārî*) cf. Jeremiah 6:23; for *wrath* (*'ebrâ*) see 9:19 〈18〉 ; 10:6; and for *anger* (*'aþ*) see 10:5. In turn, the words speak of a pitiless infliction of an overflowing anger that cannot any longer be contained, expressive of a burning personal passion. *The land* should rather be translated ‘the earth’ or ‘the world’ (cf. verse 5). The environment is caught up in human sinfulness and it too bears the consequences. For the first time in the poem the moral motivation of the day is

¹⁴ See on 17:1; 28:3; 35:10; 43:14; 48:3; 49:25. See also J. A. Motyer, *The Revelation of the Divine Name* (Tyndale Press, 1959) and Watts *ad loc.*

¹⁵ Some consider the verb *wnbhlw* to be the vestige of a lost line, which (helped by 2 Sa. 4:1; Je. 6:24; 50:43) Kaiser reconstructs as, ‘The men of Babylon shall hear and shall be dismayed’. Such a reference to Babylon here would be ruinous of the structure and inexplicable in a ‘day of the Lord’ poem. Hebrew poetry is far from being metrically insistent. Its genius is to work with adaptable forms whereby meaning dominates all.

¹⁶ See Dhorme on Jb. 26:11.

stated, hinted at hitherto by the idea of ‘holy war’ (2–3) and divine indignation (5). The day is the point at which sin comes face to face with holiness and *sinners* are destroyed (*cf.* verse 10).

10 Many ideas combine in this verse: the denial to sinners of all the beneficent influences of creation, symbolized by *light*; the visitation of wrath on a whole creation corrupted by sin (*cf.* 2:12ff.; 5:5–6, 10); the withdrawal of light, an apt symbol of the oncoming darkness of divine judgment (*cf.* 5:30); the thought of darkness as a drawing near of the God of absolute holiness (Ex. 19:16; Dt. 4:11); and the exodus plague of darkness (Ex. 10:21ff.), which spoke of condign judgment on the Lord’s adversaries but also of the separation off of the people he determined to save. The darkness, even of the day of the Lord, is within the purpose of 14:1–2.

11 To *punish* is ‘to visit’. *The world* (*tēbēl*) is the inhabited world, the world of human beings and affairs (*cf.* Ps. 24:1b). The change from the Hebrew original ‘evil’ to *its evil* is simple and common but needless. *The wicked* (*rēšā‘im*) is often used with forensic force (*e.g.* 1 Ki. 8:32) to mean ‘those found guilty at law’. The day is not an indiscriminate outpouring of wrath; each has been tried and judgment pronounced in the light of the evidence. For *sins*/‘iniquity’ see on 6:7. *Haughty* comes from a verb meaning to ‘boil or seethe’, and hence means ‘insolent, inflated with self-importance, conceited’. *Ruthless* (*ārīšîm*, ‘tyrannical’) refers to the arrogance that makes one lord it over another.

12 This is a fearful image of extermination: people with the same scarcity value as the most precious metal. *Ophir*, which is of uncertain location, was famous for fine gold (*cf.* 1 Ki. 9:28; Jb. 28:16).

13 This verse forms the summary and conclusion. Because the Lord has set his hand to a moral judgment that is cosmic (10) and world-wide (11) in extent *the heavens tremble* and *the earth will shake*. The ordered movement of the heavens and the stability of the earth, all that was achieved by creation, will be undone in judgment. *Wrath* and *anger* (as in verse 9) act as an inclusio for this subsection.

14–16 The picture of gathering armies with which the poem of the day of the Lord began (2–5) is balanced by this concluding picture of people scattering from the disaster—and being overtaken by it.

14 *Like a hunted gazelle* and *like sheep without a shepherd* are complementary similes. The first animal is endangered by the attentions of people, the second is endangered

without their attentions. So, finding the Lord as their enemy and losing him as their shepherd, humankind is indeed helpless and hopeless, with everything to flee from and nowhere to flee to. They gathered with ‘exultant arrogance’ (3) but now all they can think to do is head for home, to their *own people* and their *native land*.

15 In verse 14 there is no protector; verse 15 adds that there is no escape. *Whoever is captured*/‘everyone who is found’ is often used with the meaning ‘who happens to be there’, having survived the battle. *All who are caught* means ‘everyone who is swept away’, i.e. into flight from the battle. Whether in the battle, or as a survivor, or in flight, one fate awaits all.

16 No protection (14), no escape (15) and now, no mercy. Should any reach home it will be only to see all they held dear destroyed: the children they begat, the homes they built, the wives they loved. How is all this to be understood as the day of *the LORD* (6)? In a word, the answer is that this is what people are like to each other (cf. verse 18). When we consider the dovetailing of human and divine agency such as this passage describes, we need to remember what we think of human beings as puppets with the Lord as their puppet-master. On the contrary, they are being themselves to the full, with their natural acts fulfilling his supernatural purposes. In a very real sense, therefore, what the Bible speaks of as ‘the stretching out of his hand’ (14:26) would be more easily understood if we thought of it as the withdrawing of his hand—to leave sinners to implement all the inhumane savagery of fallen human nature, bereft of the restraining, humanizing efficacy of common grace. The Creator has so constituted humankind that sin progressively makes people less human and, therefore, less humane. The process, however, is not allowed to run its logical course in its logical way or else the race would have perished as soon as sin entered the world (Gn. 2:16–17). The Lord remains sovereign, operating his own rules, directing, restraining, prompting. But the time will come—the day of the Lord—when in a climactic way sin will take the stage as the total destroyer it always is and sinful human beings, who for so long have determined their own destiny without God, will be left, and indeed directed, to do so.

The overthrow of Babylon: the end of the kingdom (13:17–22)

The day of the Lord has many interim fulfilments. 14:24–27 will find one such in the overthrow of Assyria. Further on in history, it will be foreshadowed again in the fall of Babylon. In this way verses 17–22 are related to verses 2–16. It is not that Isaiah is here

naming retrospectively the warriors who were summoned in verses 2–5; that summoning awaits the day which, even in our time, is yet to come. But the same principles that operate in that climactic day of history operate throughout. The God whom that day reveals is the God who directs history now, and sinful human nature, which will then be seen in its true colours, is the nature which drives people on today. Against the backdrop of the day we can read contemporary history with open eyes. So here, Isaiah shows us divine direction and human motivation at work (17), savagery between people (18), the overthrow of pride (19) and the endless desolation which sin brings (20–22).

17 It is the Lord who *will stir up* … *the Medes* (cf. verse 3). He is in executive control of every movement in history, just as he will be at the last day. The reference to *the Medes* as the destroyers of Babylon is at first sight surprising since we are accustomed to ascribe the conquest to Cyrus the Persian. However, phrases which give the Medes priority over the Persians (e.g. ‘the law of the Medes and Persians’, Dn. 6:8, 12, 15; cf. Est. 10:2) and the mysterious description of Babylon’s conqueror as ‘Darius the Mede’ (Dn. 5:30)¹⁷ at least indicate that the Medes were by no means mere shadowy adjuncts to a Persian victory.¹⁸ Isaiah doubtless had his own contemporary reasons for singling them out. They *do not care for*/‘think nothing of’ silver, i.e. they cannot be bought off. Their sole motivation is conquest.

18 *Strike down* means to ‘dash in pieces’ ($\sqrt{rāṭāš}$; cf. 2 Ki. 8:12; Ps. 137:9). It is an odd verb to use of the effect of bow-shot. *BHS*, by vowel adjustment, reads ‘and the bows … shall be dashed in pieces’, i.e. just as the Medes cannot be stopped by money (17b) neither can they be stopped by arms. But a reference to counter-attack is out of context in verse 18. It may be best to assume that the verb was chosen to make a link with its occurrence in verse 16 and that it is capable, poetically, of describing corpses mangled in the course of battle, as we say ‘shot to pieces’. The sequence of *young men*, *infants*/‘fruit of the body’ and *children*/‘sons’ heaps up words to create a picture of remorseless slaughter. In the battle itself the Medes give no quarter and are devoid of human feeling. The verb *have no mercy* (*lō' yērahēmū*) contains the word for ‘womb’ and is used of compassion which stirs the emotions. Possibly, therefore, the phrase should be translated, ‘to-

¹⁷ See D. J. Wiseman, *Notes on Some Problems in the Book of Daniel* (Tyndale Press, 1965), pp. 9–16.

¹⁸ Those who wish to date this oracle in some proximity to the fall of Babylon should find this reference to the Medes and the absence of reference to the Persians a great difficulty.

wards the fruit of the body they have no parental feeling'.¹⁹ In refusing to 'look with pity on sons' they show unconcern for any future for their foes.

19 *Jewel* (*s^ebî*) and *glory*/‘beauty’ (*tip’eret*) are the words used in 4:2 of the Lord’s Branch and in 28:5 of the Lord himself. This description prepares for the parallel passage (14:3–23) where the king of Babylon claims divine honours (14:12–14). The Babylonians (Heb. ‘Chaldeans’) were a long-established south Mesopotamian people, central to the rise of Babylon to dominance, as Isaiah rightly foresaw here. *The Babylonians’ pride* (*gā’on*; cf. verse 11) will be overthrown ‘like God’s overturning of Sodom and Gomorrah’ (cf. on 1:7). With this flick of scriptural allusion Isaiah lifts the edge of the curtain: the energizing power behind the Medes is the holy God effecting just and moral purposes.

20 This verse describes the local, historical equivalent of what will be universal on the day of the Lord (9, 13–16). In *never*/‘to perpetuity’ and *all generations*/‘unto generation and generation’, the former speaks of what is unchanging, the latter of what will be experienced. The nomad *Arab* (Je. 3:2) will not make his seasonal enclave there, nor *the shepherd* give his flock an afternoon’s shelter. Thus the idea of endless, total abandonment is driven home.

21 *Lie* is the same verb as ‘rest’ in verse 20. There will be no human, friendly, domestic use but one terrifying to people. *Desert creatures* is more likely ‘desert wraiths’. *Wild goats* would be better translated ‘goat-demons’ (cf. Lv. 17:7). Bible writers often use such heathen superstitions without extending credence to them, simply for effect.

22 *Her time* (‘ēt) is not the date on the calendar but the season appropriate for such an event. For *at hand* (*qārōb*) see on ‘near’ in verse 6. This prediction looks far ahead in history. The Assyrians destroyed Babylon in 689 BC (see chapter 21), after which it was restored. Cyrus took the city in 539 but left it intact. Its continued turbulence led to a determined attack by Darius Hystapes in 518, after which it declined to desolation.

The security and future of the Lord’s people (14:1–2)

In this work of *compassion* we see a contrasting universal purpose; there is the same blending of human and divine agency as in the work of wrath, for both *the LORD ... will*

¹⁹ The phrase ‘fruit of the womb’ is always used of children in general and does not seem to refer to the atrocity of disembowelling pregnant women.

settle them in their own land (1) and *Nations will take them to their own place* (2). The return from Babylon fulfilled very little of all this. Cyrus' recognition of Israel and its God (Ezr. 1:2–4) was tongue-in-cheek. There was no popular acclaim, no influx of converts, no reversal of the captive-captor roles. But we are not to look back on the return and say that the great prophetic hopes failed any more than we look on the fall of Babylon and say that the day of the Lord did not come. Just as Babylon, by providing mini-illustrations of the punitive aspects of the day, gave notice that the day was on its way, so the return foreshadowed some beneficent aspects of the day and provided an 'earnest' that the full promise would yet be kept.

1 *Compassion* (cf. 'mercy' in verse 18) is the highly-charged devotion of a mother. *Again he will choose Israel*, i.e. the Lord will implement his choice. The Bible offers no explanation of the divine choice other than 'he loved because he loved' (Dt. 7:7f.). *Settle them*/give them rest is a traditional expression for home and security (Dt. 12:10; 2 Sa. 7:1). The *gēr* ('alien') was the political or other refugee who came as a 'temporary resident'. In Israel such people had a specially protected status (cf. Dt. 14:21, 29; 16:11) arising partly from Israel's experience in Egypt (Ex. 23:9; Dt. 10:19) but ultimately from the example of the Lord (Dt. 10:18; cf. Lv. 25:23). The doubling of *join* and *unite* emphasizes the idea of a real and true union. For *join* ($\sqrt{lāwā}$) see e.g. 56:3, 6; for *unite* ($\sqrt{sāpāh}$) see 1 Samuel 26:19, where it is translated 'my share', and Job 30:7, where it has the meaning 'to be huddled together'.

2 Again we see the reversal of roles (cf. 45:14–25; 49:22–26; 60; 66:19–24). We need to remember the royal metaphor which pervades chapters 1–37. In this light Isaiah depicts the future as being like when the Philistine overlords became servants after the Lord gave the victory (1 Sa. 17:8f.). Here the new and voluntary relationship of verse 1 becomes one of glad service on the part of the *nations*/peoples' and Israel 'will possess them for themselves'. They will enter into the wealth of the nations (as in Ex. 12:33–36) and exercise dominion domestically (*menservants and maidservants*), militarily (*make captives*) and politically (*rule over*/*dominate*), i.e. they will hold total sway. The reality of all this, however, is the spreading kingdom of peace (9:7 <6>) into which the convert presses gladly and by choice (1) and takes the servant's place within the community of grace.

The overthrow of Babylon: the end of the king (14:3–23)

See p. 135 for outline and the composite nature of this subsection. Its centre-piece is the ‘song of the fallen king’ in verses 4b–21. This has been provided with an introduction (3–4a) blending in with the foregoing theme of the restoration of the Lord’s people (1–2), and a conclusion (22–23) taking up the final thought of the song (20b–21) and turning it into a divine affirmation. It is pointless to try to identify the song with any known king. If it ever had such a connection, then, as in psalms with historical titles, the relationship is allusive and the poet more concerned to draw out principles than to retell a story. It is much more satisfactory to see here a poem within the ‘day of the Lord’ genre. Just as 13:2–6 is a poem which uses ‘day of the Lord’ imagery and then associates it with the fall of Babylon (13:17–22) as an ‘interim day’, so here the general idea of a hostile world power is personalized into the imaginative portrayal of the end of the world king and this, in turn, receives intermediate realization in the end of the imperial dynasty of Babylon (22–23). The more we think of chapters 13–27 as a study of the principles of world history merging forward into eschatology, the easier it becomes to see that from the start Babylon carries overtones of the ‘city of emptiness’ (24:10) whose fall is the end of all that opposes the Lord’s rule.

Introduction (14:3–4a)

3 Both David (2 Sa. 7:1) and Solomon (1 Ki. 8:56) were mistaken in thinking the moment had come in their day. The fulness awaits the day of the Lord. This expected *relief* ($\sqrt{nâah}$, the same verb as ‘settle’ in verse 1) includes freedom *from suffering, turmoil* and *cruel bondage*. The word for *suffering* (‘ōsh̄) reaches back to the longing expressed by Lamech when he named his son Noah (‘rest’) expecting relief from ‘painful toil’ ($iṣṣābôn$, Gn. 5:29) and before that to the outworking of the curse in ‘pain’ ($iṣṣābôn$, Gn. 3:16). The related word here signifies joy in the curse removed. *Turmoil* ($rōgez$, $\sqrt{rāgaz}$ see 2 Sa. 7:10) is the insecurity of losing one’s own land. Here, therefore, rest from *rōgez* is full security. *Cruel bondage* translates ‘harsh servitude’, which is the exact expression in Exodus 1:14. Its ending is, therefore, the sign that a full redemption has been effectuated.

4a *Taunt* does not convey the sense here. This is not an exercise in jeering or mocking. The word *mâšal* is the general Hebrew word for ‘proverb’ or ‘parable’, a saying or a way of putting something whereby the inner truth comes to light. The phrase ‘to take up a proverb’ in Numbers 23:7, 18; 24:3, 15 means ‘to explain things as he saw them’.

Hence, here, a better translation would be ‘you will bring to light the inner truth about the king’.

‘The song of the fallen king’ (14:4b–21)

No translation can reproduce the sweep and surge of this truly magnificent poem. It is the work of a master. Among known Bible writers, none but Isaiah could be its author.²⁰ It falls into four parts of which the first and last (A¹ and A²) take place on earth and the middle sections (B¹ and B²) take place in Sheol.

Reactions (4b–10)

A¹ Earth’s reaction to the end of oppression (4b–8)

B¹ Sheol’s reaction to the arrival of the king (9–10)

Contrasts (11–21)

B² Ambition and accomplishment. Not the apex of heaven but the nadir of Sheol
(11–15)

A² Expectation and actuality. No continuance of tomb or line (16–23)

4b *Has come to an end* and *has ended* are the same verb meaning ‘has stopped’. *Oppressor* ($\sqrt{nāḡāš}$), the same word as in verse 2, is used characteristically of the Egyptian oppression (Ex. 3:7; 5:6; etc. cf. 9:4 <3>). *Fury* (MT, *madhēbâ*) is found only here and is of unknown meaning. Q^a’s *marhēbâ* is not used elsewhere but is traceable to $\sqrt{rāhab}$ (‘to be arrogant’; see 30:7).

5 The *wicked* (plural, *rēšā’im*) are those guilty before the court (cf. 13:11). The evidence of their guilt comes in verse 6. The king is the last of a line of wicked *rulers*, the inheritor and culmination of their guilt (cf. *forefathers* in verse 21). *Rod* (*maṭṭēh*) and *sceptre* (*šēbet*) are translated ‘bar’ and ‘rod’, respectively, in 9:4 <3> .

6 The king is accused of malevolence (on *anger* [‘ebrâ] and *fury* [‘ap] see 10:5), violence, a reign of terror (*unceasing blows*), and *relentless aggression/‘persecution’*.²¹ In sum, the

²⁰ Erlandsson (p.128) notes that 83% of the words in this ‘song of the fallen king’ are found in the agreed work of Isaiah. Of the remaining twenty-three words, seventeen are agreed to be pre-exilic and the remaining six words, alleged to be late, are found on examination not to be so.

^aThe St Mark’s Isaiah Scroll from Qumran.

²¹ *murdāp* (‘persecution’) occurs only here, and Kissane and others would emend it to *mird* (‘domination’), a word not found elsewhere! Nouns of the same formation as *murdāp* occur in 8:23; 29:3.

toleration of only one opinion and ideology and the suppression of all others.

7–8 The liberation extends to creation and *all the lands*/‘all the earth’, ‘the whole world’ rests and sings. In 37:24 felling trees in Lebanon is Isaiah’s figure for the boasting self-confidence of the king of Assyria. *Lebanon* stands for what God, not human beings, has planted (Ps. 104:16). To cut Lebanon down is to seek to impose a human ordering on God’s creation, to seek to be God (13.) Note how in the matching section (verses 16–21) verse 19 makes the king himself the rotten branch! With exact justice the arrogant woodsman has ‘had the chop’! (Cf. 44:23; 55:12; Ps. 96:12; Rom. 8:19–22.)

9–15 This poem is an imaginative visit to Sheol. Though neither an architect’s drawing of the world-to-come nor a sociologist’s report, a poem can be expected to draw out principles and focus issues. In this way it expresses some central Old Testament truths about the dead. First, the dead are alive—in Sheol. In the Bible ‘death’ is never ‘termination’ but a change of place and of state with continuity of personal identity. Sheol is the ‘place’ where all the dead live (see Jb. 3:11–19; Ps. 49:9). Secondly, in Sheol there is personal continuity and mutual recognition; the king is recognized as he arrives (10). Those already there rise from their thrones, not because there are thrones in Sheol but to show that they are the same people as they were on earth. In the same way, Abraham was ‘gathered to his people’ (Gn. 25:8), and David looked forward to joining his infant son (2 Sa 12:23). Thirdly, Sheol is a place of weakness with loss, not enhancement, of earthly powers. The dead are ‘shades’ or ‘shadowy ones’ (see on verse 9), who describe themselves as having become ‘weak’ (10). In verse 11 Sheol is related to the grave and the decomposing corpse. This hints at the explanation of the weakness: in biblical understanding human beings are embodied souls/besouled bodies, but at death this unity is sundered and the body falls into the ground. How, then, can the spirit in Sheol be a complete person? The Old Testament awaits Jesus and the illumination of immortality (2 Tim. 1:10) to fulfil its hints of the resurrection of the body. Yet in this as in all else, the Old Testament establishes truth, not error; the dead live on, personality continues with mutual recognition. The dead, as incomplete personalities awaiting fulness, can neither help nor hurt the living—a perfect answer to spiritism.

9 On the grave/‘Sheol’ see 5:14. *Rouses* and *makes* are masculine verbs, whereas ‘Sheol’ is usually feminine. However, in Job. 26:6 Sheol is masculine and in any case the verbs here could be treated as indefinite (e.g. ‘one rouses’) equivalent in force to a passive. *The*

spirits of the departed (*r^epā’im*, ‘the shadowy ones’) is of uncertain derivation but is often related to √ *rāpâ* (‘to sink down, droop’ or ‘fail of strength’).²² *Leaders* is (lit.) ‘he-goats’, i.e. of great importance and vitality. The erstwhile description is used ironically—the shadowy ones he-goats!

10 *Weak* (√ *ḥālā*) means ‘to be sick, flabby, ineffectual’. The very sound of the Hebrew of this line expresses lassitude.

11–15 This second Sheol passage contrasts what the king intended and what he achieved. It is a moot point whether verse 11 is a concluding comment by the shadowy ones (in which case its reference to ‘Sheol’ forms an inclusio with ‘Sheol’ in verse 9) or the beginning of the ‘contrast’ section (in which case—and better—*Your pomp has been brought down* ‘to Sheol’ (11) opens the section and *You are brought down* ‘to Sheol’ (15) ends it).

11 *The grave* should be ‘Sheol’, for it is not the cemetery that is in view but the home of the departed in the next world. Sheol is the end alike of pride (*pomp*, *gā’ôn*, see 13:11) and pleasure (*harps*, see 5:12), self-importance and self-indulgence. But there is also the body to consider, the cemetery too has its testimony. What a bed for a king! What a bedsheet! The grave exposes the frailty, the insubstantiality of our humanity. What place is left for pride? What ultimate value has the pampering and indulgence of the body? Here, at a stroke, is revealed the weakness of the dead and the half-life of Sheol, for the body too must be spoken of as *you*. It, as much as the soul, is the person. It is in the light of a verse like this that passages like 2 Corinthians 4:16–5:5 come into their own.

12 Behind Isaiah’s reference to the *morning star* (*hêlēl*, ‘shining one’) lies a Canaanite mythology of the ‘revolt in heaven’ genre: the morning star, *Helal* (which BHS would read here and which Albright says is Ishtar),²³ attempted a coup which failed, with loss of status for him. The Old Testament uses such allusions without attributing reality to the *dramatis personae* (cf. on 51:9ff.). *Cast down* is ‘felled’ (cf. 9:10 <9>).

²² An identical word describes the pre-Israelite inhabitants of Canaan (Dt. 2:11, 20; 3:11) but since they are people of fearsome power the identity of spelling can only be a coincidence. For the ‘shadowy ones’ cf. Jb. 26:5; Ps. 88:10<11>; Pr. 2:18.

²³ W. F. Albright, *Archaeology and the Religion of Israel* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1942), p. 84.

13 The emphases in this verse fall on *You, to heaven and above the stars of God*. While verses **11** and **12** dealt mainly with public facts, the transformation in the status and influence of the king, verse **13** takes us into his *heart*, the place of secret ambition. For *God ('ēl)*, see on [5:16](#). Behind the phrase *the mount of assembly* lies the mythological idea that the gods lived on mountains. The *assembly* is the gathered pantheon. On *sacred mountain (yarkētē šāpōn)* see the NIV mg. Mount Zaphon lay in the north of Palestine and in Canaanite mythology was the seat of the gods. [Psalm 48:2 <3>](#) uses the same expression with the implication that if there should be such a place as ‘the apex of Zaphon’ it would be Zion.

14 For *the Most High ('elyōn)* see [Genesis 14:18–19, 22](#) (cf. [Dn. 4:17, 24–25](#); [2 Thes. 2:4](#)).

15 *The grave* translates ‘Sheol’ and *the depths* translates *yarkētē*, which is ‘utmost’ in verse **13**. The word means whatever is furthest in whatever direction the context requires. Thus the king reached for the apex of heaven and came to the nadir of *the pit*, a synonym for Sheol in its more threatening aspects ([Ps. 28:1; 143:7](#); [Is. 38:18](#)).

16–21 The element of contrast is further extended as the poem returns to the earthly scene: what the king might have expected and what actually happened. There is neither an imposing tomb nor a continuing line to commemorate him.

16–17 *Stare (✓šāgāh)* is used in [Psalm 33:14](#) of the penetrating gaze of God, and in [Song of Songs 2:9](#) of the longing gaze of the lover. The contrast between expectation and reality is apparent as they *ponder/‘discern about’* the *fate* of the king. Can this man have effected such depredation on the work of God (*he shook the earth and made the world a desert*) and of people (*he made kingdoms tremble and overthrew ... cities*)? Did he really exercise such an inhumane grip on people that he *would not let his captives go home*? Yet that is what he did and, like all who do such things, he fell because of them (see verse **20**).

18–20a *Tomb/‘house’* means ‘mausoleum’ here—the grandiose houses of the dead that earth’s great ones construct. *But you* is emphatic, exactly as in verse **13**. *Your tomb (qeber)* is the usual word for ‘grave’. He is a *rejected/‘detested’ (nēṣer)* branch, in contrast with the honoured branch from Jesse’s root ([11:1](#)). The king is a ‘shoot’ of kings but is reckoned fit only for the compost heap. *Covered/‘clothed’ with the slain* is a telling phrase. Stripped of his royal robes, the king now has nothing to clothe him but the bodies of those who died in the battle, heaped together ignominiously. *Stones of the pit*

is the rock bottom of the pit of Sheol (cf. verse 15). His grave is unmarked and therefore unconsciously *trampled underfoot*, walked over. For another king burial expectations worked in the reverse direction (53:9). There is no-one concerned to secure a suitably royal burial for the king. His forebears were carried to the family mausoleum (18) but he will not *join them*/‘be joined with them’. In many ways he would have been no worse than they (5–6). Why then are they in honoured tombs and not he? Because iniquity works until it is full. Biblically, the sins of the fathers do not excuse but enhance the guilt of the sons (cf. Lk. 11:50) until iniquity can no longer pass unrequited (Gn. 15:16). Providence waits, probation works out, judgment falls.

20b–21 The Old Testament forbids human judicial processes to punish children for parental sins (Dt. 24:16) but the solidarity of the race necessitates just such visitations in the providential ways of God. For good and ill, children are the heirs of their parents (Ex. 20:5–6). It was, however, royal practice to secure the throne by removing all challengers, and the best (1 Ki. 2:24f.) as well as the worst (2 Ki. 10:1ff.) of Old Testament rulers fell into this wickedness. Here Isaiah imagines a proclamation going out to guarantee against the perpetuation of a royal line such as this. The *cities* were power-bases and also, as was the first Babel (Gn. 11:1ff.), symbols and occasions of human boasted self-sufficiency. This will never be allowed to happen again.

Conclusion (14:22–23)

The whole section (3–23) on the downfall of the king matches that on the downfall of the city (13:17–22) in the overall structure of the passage. This tailpiece, however, with its first-person statements from the Lord, matches the wording of the earlier section and shows how all that has been said in principle about the final proud king will have interim exemplification in the way the Lord will deal with the actual king of Babylon. The termination of the royal line (22; cf. verses 20b–21) and the blighted land (23; cf. verse 20a) make precise links between the eschatological and the imminent. The *LORD Almighty will rise*—world government rests with him. The verb forms a striking comparison with ‘they are not to rise’ in verse 21b. On *declares* (*n̄um*) see 1:24. The use of the phrase three times is like a triple seal of authenticity and validation. On *Almighty*/‘of hosts’ see 1:9. Even Babylon’s *name* will disappear; no *survivors*/‘remainder’ will live to tell the tale; there will be no inheritance to enjoy. *Offspring and descendants* (*n̄n wāneked*) seems to be a legal expression like ‘heirs and successors’ (cf. Gn. 21:23). On

owls etc. cf. 13:21–22. The *broom* is a vivid image; it removes every last vestige. The Lord’s broom is mighty enough to sweep the whole of great Babylon to destruction and oblivion.

The end of Assyrian power: a universal purpose exemplified and validated (14:24–27)

(See pp. 134f. on the interim fulfilments and pp. 131ff. for the structure of the section.) The substance of these verses is that the Assyrian threat, current in Isaiah’s day, would be decisively crushed in the Lord’s own land (24–25), that is, with his then people as witness. This attested act of God is then used as an example of the way the divine hand governs all nations and executes an irresistible world purpose (26–27). The outstretched hand of verse 27 forms an inclusio with 13:2. The historical act which they see will be replicated in the eschatological judgment on the whole world and now acts as a guarantee of it.

24 On *sworn* see 5:9; 22:14; 45:23; 54:9; 62:8. *Planned* ($\sqrt{dāmā}$, cf. 10:7) is the plan framed in the mind, *purposed* ($\sqrt{yā'aṣ}$) is its formulation as a scheme (noun and verb occur in verse 26 and the verb again in verse 27). Thus Isaiah hammers home that the local event—the Assyrian overthrow—is the model of the universal, which is yet to come.²⁴

25 See chapter 37 for the fulfilment of this verse. The use of prediction and fulfilment as proof that the Lord is the living and only God is typically Isaianic. In *his yoke will be taken*/‘will remove’ and *his burden removed* the vocabulary is exactly as at 10:27.

26–27 Things are now on a universal scale (*the whole world, all nations*; cf. 13:5). The Assyrian incident is the model for the eschaton. *The LORDAlmighty*/‘of hosts’ is emphatic. *Thwart* ($\sqrt{pārar}$, ‘to disannul, render null and void’) is a reference to the Lord’s plan, whereas the turning back of *his hand*/‘and it is his hand that is ...’ refers to the Lord himself.

b. Philistia: the Davidic dynasty and the Davidic promises (14:28–32)

It is understandable that Isaiah should find Ahaz’s death a significant event. It was his

²⁴ On the Lord’s ‘counsel’ ($\sqrt{yā'aṣ}$; noun, ‘ $\bar{e}ṣā$ ’) see 5:19; 19:12, 17; 23:8–9; 25:1; 28:29; 40:14; 44:26; 46:10–11—an impressive Isaianic usage. Jeremiah has the noun in 32:19 and the noun and verb in 49:20; 50:45. In the remaining prophets, Mi. 4:12 is the only instance.

refusal of the way of faith and his decision to tie Judah's fortunes to the coat-tails of Assyria that marked, for the prophet, the end of the Davidic dynasty as it had been known. What would now happen? The present verses suggest that into this situation came a delegation from Philistia. Through the Assyrian period, Philistia was one of the great political agitators. In 734 Gath refused to pay tribute and was sacked, and in 720 the Philistine cities were conniving with Egypt against Assyria but Sargon II defeated Egypt at Gaza and conquered Ashkelon and Gath. In 711 Ashdod was in some way central to a general west Palestinian revolt which was quelled, and the Ashkelon rebellion of 705 was overtaken in 701 by Sennacherib's punitive expedition. When Ahaz, the arch-collaborator with Assyria, died in 715 it would seem that Philistia took the opportunity to make overtures to Hezekiah, presumably under cover of a mission of condolence. At any rate, such a scenario fits in with the wording of this oracle. We can see this if we ask what question would elicit the answer given in verse 32, 'It is the Lord who has established Zion and it is in her that the downtrodden of his people take refuge'. A strength other than the Lord must have been on offer and a refuge other than in Zion. It is likely, therefore, that Philistia, backed by Egypt, was offering the strength of an anti-Assyrian alliance as the way to recover national sovereignty. To Isaiah this was pernicious. Certainly the times were menacing (verse 31) and certainly the aspiration to independence was enticing and legitimate, but all the security Zion needed was to be found in the Lord who had founded the city.

The oracle is expressed in a pair of contrasts:

The first contrast: ultimate destinies (29–30)

A¹ The future of David's line and the safety of Zion (29–30a)

B¹ The total end of Philistia (30b)

The second contrast: immediate fortunes (31–32)

B² Common danger: helpless Philistia (31)

A² The security of Zion and its people (32)

28 This is the second time Isaiah has dated an oracle by a death (see 6:1 and introductory paragraph above).²⁵ When Ahaz refused the way of faith (7:9b–13), Isaiah made no

²⁵ The Isaianic origin of this oracle is now well supported (e.g. Wilderberger). It is antecedently unlikely that any but Isaiah would date the oracle by a death.

secret of the unparalleled damage that had been done to David's house ([7:17](#)) but, nevertheless, in that setting he affirmed the hope of David's line in 'Immanuel' terms. So here, on the death of the unbeliever, Isaiah steps forward to reiterate the promises. The faithlessness of people does not dilute the faithfulness of God.

29 The city-states of Philistia did not always act in concert, hence the need to specify (*all you Philistines*/‘Philistia, all of you’) that the danger threatened all alike. The *rod that struck you* was David himself. No other king was so consistently victorious over the Philistines,²⁶ and indeed it was in the teeth of specifically Philistine opposition that David established his kingdom and dynasty. Up to the time of Ahaz, David's kingdom, whatever its vissitudes, had remained a sovereign state, but by the time of Ahaz's death his policies had resulted in vassalage to Assyria. Thus the *rod* was *broken*. Though the Philistine delegation may secretly have hoped to win Hezekiah to the anti-Assyrian cause they felt able to *rejoice* that they had nothing to fear from a puppet monarch. To this depth had unbelief and disobedience brought the Lord's kingdom. [Exodus 4:2–3](#) and [7:10–12](#) account for the odd movement of thought from *rod* to *snake*. David is broken but the Lord's power of victory resides in the fallen rod. *Viper* (*sip'ōnî*, ‘viper’ in [11:8](#); it is an unidentified species of poisonous snake. *Darting, venomous serpent*/‘fiery flying one’ is the same as at [30:6](#)). The picture is impressionistic: the *rod* which had received its death-blow would, none the less, increase in strength, vitality and deadly menace to its foes. Thus Isaiah keeps faith with the motif of Moses' rod, just as in [11:14](#), under the kingly metaphor, he saw the Philistines as conquered by force.

30 While it is by no means obvious what the phrase *the poorest of the poor*/‘the first-born of the poor’ means,²⁷ firstborn is another exodus motif ([Ex. 4:22](#)). In Egypt, Israel, downtrodden and doomed as far as the power of the world (Egypt) was concerned, had a

²⁶ Cf. [1 Sa. 17:50; 18:25–30; 19:8; 23:1–5; 2 Sa. 5:17–25; 8:1](#). Many suppose that the broken rod refers to the death of an Assyrian king (e.g. Clements suggests either Tiglath-pileser III, who died in 727/6, or Shalmaneser V, who died in 722). Both of these events were, however, considerably before the death of Ahaz, and there was no way in which the death of either king had ‘broken’ Assyria, which was now ruled by the great Sargon II. In such a circumstance what would the Philistines have to be happy about?

²⁷ With ‘the firstborn of death’, [Jb. 18:13](#) offers the nearest formal parallel—but what does the phrase mean? Dhorme, Driver, Rowley and Clines offer nothing certain.

status which made them indestructible and inevitably victorious. Since the phrase requires some elaboration in translation it would be better to treat ‘of the poor’ as an appositional genitive, *i.e.* ‘the firstborn, poor though they be’. On *poor* (*dal*) see 10:2. *Needy* (*ebyôn*) is from *'ābâ*, (‘to be willing’). In its good sense it means ‘pliant’ to the will of God; in its bad sense, ‘those who can be bent to the will of others’ and hence, ‘exploited’. *Find pasture* is another exodus motif (Ps. 77:20 <21>). *Your root* is in contrast to the vitality of the Davidic root (29). For Philistia, whatever holds promise for the future (*root*) and whatever exists in the present (*survivors/‘remnant’*) are alike doomed: there will be total destruction.

31 The *gate* was the key target in an attack; once it yielded the *city* had fallen. The address here is not to any particular city but to city and gate as such, in Judah as well as Philistia. Both are equally under Assyrian threat. But beyond that the outcome is different. *Melt* ($\sqrt{mûg}$, e.g. Jos. 2:9, 24) means to be demoralized, with no heart for resistance. So will Philistia be against the *cloud* from the *north* (see p. 135, n. 1). The reference to *smoke* (*'ăšān*; see Song 3:6) is to the dust cloud raised by the advancing army. The phrase *not a straggler* is unparalleled and the meaning not certain. It means (lit.) ‘There is none by himself/standing alone at his appointed times/in his assembled company.’²⁸

32 Now Isaiah offers a reply to the Philistine *envoys*. In substance, the future of Zion is very different. In the face of the same threat, it will be secure and its people safe. *Shall be given* understands the verb as third person indefinite, equivalent to the passive. It could, of course, refer to Hezekiah, ‘So what is he to reply ...?’ (see p. 147). *The LORD* is emphatic, ‘It is the Lord who ...’. The primary reality for the Lord’s people in any situation—and especially in a crisis—is the Lord himself. *Established* ($\sqrt{yāsad}$) means ‘laid the foundations of’. For *afflicted* see ‘oppressed’ in 10:2. In the vocabulary of *refuge* this verb ($\sqrt{hāsâ}$) expresses the availability of a safe place to turn to. The Zion-people have no need to seek Philistia’s help or to fear what Philistia fears; they have the Lord in Zion.

c. Moab: pride before a fall and the conditions of Gentile hope (15:1–16:14)

The thematic development of the oracles continues. The Babylon oracle revealed that

²⁸ Q^a reads *mwded* (*mōdēd* for the MT *bōded* but what would this mean? H. Donner (‘Israel unter den Volkern’, VTS, 11 [1964]) offers ‘no-one counts’ (from $\sqrt{mādād}$, ‘to measure’). G.R. Driver (‘Hebrew Scrolls’ JTS, 2 [1951], 26) says $\sqrt{bādād}$ can mean ‘to be a deserter’.

world history, even in its most threatening and climactic forms, is so organized that the people of God are cared for. The Philistia oracle confirmed this by insisting that the Davidic promises would be kept, and the Moab oracle corrects any impression that the hope expressed in the Davidic promises is exclusivist. Isaiah now says that the promises which will be fulfilled for David in Zion are for all who will take refuge there. The oracle is expressed in emotionally charged, allusive poetry but its message is plain in its structure:

A¹ Moab's certain ruin ([15:1](#))

B¹ Moab's grief expressed ([2–4](#))

C¹ The Lord's grief over Moab ([5–9](#))

D¹ Moab's plea for shelter ([16:1–4a](#))

E Security in Zion ([4b–5](#))

D² Moab's pride ([6](#))

B² Moab's grief explained ([7–8](#))

C² The Lord's grief over Moab ([9–12](#))

A² Moab's imminent ruin ([13–14](#))

The relationship between A¹ and A² has exercised commentators. The general view seems to be that different Moabite crises are in view. Mauchline holds that [15:1](#) refers to Sargon II's campaign in 715, targeting north-western Arabian tribes and devastating Moab en route, and that [16:13–14](#) refers to his later campaign of 711, or maybe to Sennacherib's campaign 'which caused great havoc in the whole area'.²⁹ It is, however, simpler to see the same event predicted in each section. The perfect tenses of [15:1](#) express certainty as if it had already happened, and in [16:13–14](#) Isaiah gives renewed publicity to his prediction by setting a time limit on its fulfilment.

While, of course, this oracle must have had a setting in time, the question remains whether it represents an actual historical event. Did a Moabite delegation ever thus approach Zion for asylum and alliance? In the anxieties caused by the Assyrian threat there would be nothing unusual in supposing that this did happen and that it provided Isaiah with a base for an imaginative portrayal of the circumstances, an analysis of the real issues involved and an indication of the reply he would have wished to return to the

²⁹ Mauchline, p. 150.

delegation (see further on 16:13–14). But, certainly in these oracle chapters, we can become too date-conscious and not sufficiently theme-conscious. Had Isaiah considered that the oracle needed a clear historical setting, he would have given it. But the wording throughout is non-specific and even the foe is the unnamed ‘rulers of the nations’ (16:8). Attention is focused on content not on occasion.

The Moab oracle is linked with the immediately foregoing ones by its revelation of a real Gentile security in Zion. The fact that Moab lost this through pride links with the Babylon oracle (13:19; 14:12–14). Pride is not the preserve of great powers nor reserved for the eschatological day. It brings destruction and sorrow here and now, standing between the needy and the security they can obtain only by submitting to the people and promises of the Lord. Isaiah’s intention is not to mark out a situation but to underline a reaction: pride and the doom it brings.

Moab’s certain ruin (15:1)

Discreditable though Genesis 19:37 is, it means that *Moab* was reckoned a ‘cousin’ nation. This gives colour to the possibility of Moab’s seeking shelter in Zion in a crisis. *Ar* is placed by Deuteronomy 2:18 on the border of Moab. *Kir* is possibly Kir Hareseth (16:7, 11) in central Moab twelve miles east of the Dead Sea (cf. 2 Ki. 3:25; Je. 48:31, 36). Since *Kir* means ‘city’, the references to ‘*Ar* of Moab’ and ‘the city of Moab’ could indicate a devastation of the whole country from the border to the capital. On *ruined*/‘silenced’ see 6:5. *In a night* refers to an attack of such catastrophic proportions that a single night assault sufficed.

Moab’s grief expressed (15:2–4)

Moab’s grief is given religious expression (2). National lamentation spreads through every town (3). From one town to another the cry is taken up (4a); even soldiers turn to weeping.

2 *Dibon* was north of the Arnon; *Nebo* and *Medeba* further north still. The heaping up of names is characteristic of Isaiah (e.g. 10:9–10, 28–32) and here creates the impression of widespread disaster. A parallel text, Jeremiah 48:18, reads ‘daughter of Dibon’, an easy emendation here where the MT has ‘he [i.e. Ar and Kir] has gone up to the house [i.e. temple] and to Dibon, to the high places for weeping ...’. *Shaved* is a sign of mourning (22:12; Mi. 1:16).

3 Now mourning becomes local and domestic, war sorrow has come into the home.

Prostrate with weeping/‘going down in weeping’ probably means ‘with tears flooding down’ (cf. *√ yārad* in Ps. 133:2–3 where it is used of oil and dew pouring down).

4 *Heshbon*, *Eleaher* and *Jahaz* were the furthest north of the cities so far mentioned. The tragedy is so overwhelming that the military (*armed men*; cf. Am. 5:16) can only turn to helpless sorrow. In *their hearts are faint*/‘his soul trembles’ the singular ‘his’ could refer to Moab personified or to the *armed men* individualized. The ‘soul’ is the person at centre, mastered by trembling.

The Lord’s grief over Moab (15:5–9)

My heart (5) is matched by *I will bring* (9), identifying the mourner as the Lord. He grieves over the plight of the fugitives (5), the stricken environment (6), the futile efforts to salvage something from the overthrow (7–8) and over what is yet to come (9). The explanatory conjunction ‘for’ runs through these verses (sadly omitted by the NIV), appearing in verse 5 before *they go* and *on the road*, and in verse 6 at the beginning and instead of *and* before *the grass*. It also appears at the beginning of verses 8 and 9 and instead of *but* in verse 9. These verses are a long list of what touches the heart of God, who weeps as he smites. The grief of the judge of all the earth is one of the two striking truths of this oracle. The other is that all this total loss and suffering arises from the single sin of pride (16:6).

5 The impressionistic list of towns beginning here runs south-west, in contrast to the northern towns of verses 2–4. The enemy enters from the north and Moab flees southwards. *Zoar* (Gn.19:21–22) was in the southern Dead Sea area. *Eglath Shelishiyah* is unknown. *Luhith* and *Horonaim* were presumably in the same general area (cf. Je. 48:5).

6 *Nimrim* (Nu. 32:3, 36; Jos. 13:27) is probably the *Wadi Numeirah* in southern Moab.

7 This verse describes a pathetic war occurrence: refugees frantic to save something of what they have spent their lives acquiring. Imperial glory comes at the expense of those at the bottom of life’s heap not those at the top. *The Ravine of the Poplars* may be *Wadi Zered* on the southern border of Moab (Nu. 21:12; Dt. 2:13).

8 *Eglaim* and *Beer Elim* are unknown. The verse would be suited if they were the ‘Dan and Beersheba’ of Moab, expressing the whole length of the land.

9 Q^a reads ‘Dibon’ (instead of *Dimon*) in each place, neatly forming an inclusio with

^aThe St Mark’s Isaiah Scroll from Qumran.

verse 2. Kissane thinks *Dimon* is a dialectical variant and this may be the case: the assonance of *mê-dimōn mālē'û dām* ('The waters of Dimon are full of blood') would certainly have appealed to Isaiah. There is an allusion to 2 Kings 3:22–23: once Moab saw a mirage of blood but now it is all too real, and it is their own! But even blood enough to make rivers run red does not satisfy the divine wrath 'for' (not *but*, as NIV) *I will bring still more*. Tears (5) and the utmost wrath (9) are at one in the divine nature. The *lion* was used as a descriptive human title, denoting a fierce, implacable attacker³⁰ destroying alike *fugitives* and those who *remain in the land*.

Moab's plea for shelter (16:1–4a)

The scene changes and we find Isaiah eavesdropping at a Moabite 'Cabinet' meeting at *Sela* (1) in the far south, whither, presumably, the government has fled. In the panting, breathless Hebrew which he writes we catch the panic of the leaders, one saying one thing, another something else.

1 *Lambs*, the traditional Moabite tribute (2 Ki. 3:4), would properly figure in a request for asylum. The envoys would have had to cross *the desert* in southern Judah, west of the Dead Sea, to reach *Zion*. The vague description *the ruler of the land* is intentional; driven by desperation, Moab's leaders feel compelled to approach Judah but are not ready to admit that they will have to recognize the Davidic king as their overlord.

2 The government may have put as many miles as possible between themselves and the advancing foe but they are not heartless. What drives them to approach Zion's king is the news of things sixty miles to the north and only a few miles short of the blood-red waters of Dibon (15:9): the jam of Moabite girls desperate to cross the *Arnon* in hope of safety. Refugees are the most pathetic sight in war (15:8) but girls suffer the cruellest fate.

3 This verse sets out the message with which the envoys were sent to Zion. *Give, render, make and hide* are all feminine singular imperatives, addressed to the *daughter of*

³⁰ Seale (p. 99) says that in nomadic Arabic practice animal names are used as honorifics (cf. 21:7–9). He quotes the boast of an Arabian warrior, 'To meet me is to encounter a rampant lion ...'. 2 Sa. 23:20 and 1 Ch. 11:22 refer to the 'Ariels' of Moab. The context suggests notable warriors, perhaps an elite corps. It is a subtlety worthy of Isaiah to threaten *'aryēh* (a lion) on the land of *'aṣr'ēl* ('lion of God'). Did they boast of lions? Lions they shall have!

Zion (1).³¹ *Counsel* is a general request for advice, but *decision* (*p^elilâ*; only found here but cf. $\sqrt{pālal}$ in 1 Sa. 2:25; Ps. 106:30) is specific and means a governmental decision. Figuratively, Moab is like one exposed to the blinding sun of *noon*, needing the relief of *night*/‘darkness’. Actually the request is for immediate shelter (*hide* is from $\sqrt{sātar}$; cf. ‘shelter’ [sēter] in verse 4) and for Zion to refuse all requests for extradition (*do not betray*/‘uncover, expose’).

4a Their second request is for protected status as resident aliens: ‘Let the Moabites who have been driven out’ *stay* ($\sqrt{gūr}$). On *aliens* (*gēr*) see 14:1. They also want open identification with Moab against the *destroyer*. The fretful Hebrew of verses 1–3 increases in intensity here as if we could actually hear the envoy panting from his hurried journey: ‘Let my outcasts stay with you—Moab—be a shelter for him from the destroyer.’

Security in Zion (16:4b–5)

The content of these verses shows that this is the reply to Moab. But who is the speaker? Is it the prophet voicing what he hopes would be the reply were Moab ever to make such an approach? Is it the Lord speaking? Since the Lord intervenes to speak in 15:5ff. and 16:9ff, it suits the drama of the poem that he speaks here too. His message is one of assurance to the Moabites (the first two verbs are perfects of certainty, the third a future). Realistically, it is not said how soon this will happen, for the promises of God do not offer immunity from earth’s trials, and the Bible does not entice by unreal expectations. It is the way of faith to accept life as it comes and to see behind it the hand of God. This is what Zion can offer Moab: the certainty that there will be an end, full of righteousness.

4b An *oppressor*/‘one squeezing’³² is one who cramps lives and limits freedom;

³¹ In the MT the verbs in verse 3 are difficult. (For the first, *Kethib* reads second person plural, *Qre*, second person singular feminine.) The second verb is second person plural and the third and fourth are second person singular feminine. It is easy, of course, to harmonize them to second person singular feminine throughout as an address to Zion (see *BHS*). If the first two are retained as second person plural, they represent discussion among the Moabite leaders.

³² The *oppressor* (*hammēš*) does not occur elsewhere, but the noun *mîṣ* (‘a pressing, squeezing’; cf. Pr. 30:33) requires a root *mûṣ*, which would yield a participial form as in the present verse. *KB*

aggressor/‘one trampling down’ refers to brutality to the person.³³

5 So far the reply has taken up and imitated the excited speech of the envoys but now this gives way to a majestic rhythm affirming the Davidic hope. If faith sees the present as ordained by God, it sees the future as secure in his sovereign purposes. *Love* (*hesed*) is the Lord’s covenanted love for his people, prompting all he is and all he does towards them, guaranteeing that he will never let them go, steadfast in all his obligations. The kings of Israel, for all their faults, had a reputation for (*hesed*) (cf. 1 Ki. 20:31 where the same word is translated ‘merciful’). Here it is the mark of the coming kingdom. That a *throne will be established* is the opposite of what Moab is experiencing, the changing fortunes of human rule; there will be no more fright or flight. *Faithfulness* means reliability or steadiness and is the opposite of fickleness and capriciousness. This is also the mark of the coming king, who will sit enthroned (lit.) ‘in the tent of David’, i.e. he will not be a usurper but one with a true lineage, an undoubted claim. Thirdly, the king will administer his kingdom (lit.) ‘judging and seeking justice and swift in righteousness’. On justice and righteousness see 1:21. Thus, when the Moabites come in desperate need, there is held out to them, without question, the Messianic best that Zion can offer. Nothing could show more clearly that Messianic faith as Isaiah cherished it was consciously universal.

Moab’s pride and her grief explained (16:6–8)

The scene changes again and Moab returns to wailing. Since Zion did not rebuff their appeal (4b–5), their unchanged plight can only mean that they refused what was offered. The entry fee was too high, for they could only enjoy Zion’s security at the price of owning Zion’s king. If they had been asked for money or required to double or treble their tribute of lambs (1) their pride would have been left intact, but to submit to Zion’s king was tantamount to admitting that only he could save them. But, keeping their pride intact, they remained in unrelieved misery.

6 In verse 5, four words (love, faithfulness, justice, righteousness) described what the Moabites might have enjoyed. In this verse, four words tell what they chose instead:

advises *ḥōmēš* (participle from $\sqrt{ḥāmaṣ}$) with the same meaning (cf. Ps. 71:4).

³³ The verb *will vanish* is plural and the subject *the aggressor* is singular, i.e. ‘They have gone completely, everyone who trampled ...’.

pride, conceit, pride and insolence. Overweening pride is an interjected adjectival expression, ‘—very proud!—’. The first three nouns are variants on the root *gā’â*, meaning ‘to be high’. It can be used in a good sense to mean ‘exaltation’ or ‘majesty’ ([2:10](#); [4:2](#)) but also has a bad sense, meaning ‘haughtiness’ ([2:12](#)). Insolence (*‘ebrâ*) occurs in [10:5](#) as ‘anger’, but here it means ‘affrontery’, a self-esteem that cannot be contained. On this Isaiah comments, ‘His boasts are not right’. *Boasts* is from a verb meaning ‘to invent, devise’, and therefore to live in a world of unreality. Isaiah’s implication is that the way of faith is the way of realism, of facing facts as they are. To reject the way of faith for self-confidence is to retreat into a dream world—except that its consequences ([7–8](#)) are far from dreamlike.

[7–8](#) This is the first of three ‘therefore’ sections ([7–8](#), [9–10](#), [11–12](#)). The second and third record the Lord’s reactions; the first records the consequences of refusing security in Zion. *Therefore the Moabites wail* is (lit.) ‘Therefore wails Moab; belonging to Moab all who are his wail.’ Note how the verb begins and ends the line, bracketing Moab and all who are his. *Raisin cakes* (see NIV mg.)³⁴ were made of compressed dried grapes, but why are they mentioned here? Isaiah goes on to see the vines of Moab as a picture of spreading influence ([8](#)). Maybe, by contrast, the raisin cakes picture the former home-enjoyment of prosperity.

[8](#) The exact locations of *Heshbon* ([15:4](#)) and *Sibmah* ([Jos. 13:19](#); [Nu. 32:38](#)) are unknown. The expression *rulers of the nations* is found only here. *Jazer* ([Nu. 21:32](#); [Jos. 13:25](#)) was beyond the northern border of Moab; the *desert* lay to the east and the *sea* to the west. Thus Moab reached out in every direction (*cf. Ps. 80:8ff.*).

The Lord’s grief over Moab ([16:9–12](#))

The conjunction between *I weep* ([9](#)) and *I have put an end ...* ([10](#)) indicates that once more the Lord is the subject. The initial *So/*‘Therefore’ of verse [9](#) (see on verse [7](#)) means that the Lord too grieves over the pride of Moab and its consequences. In [15:5](#) he wept for Moab, but now he weeps *with* Moab, *as Jazer weeps* (see below), making its tears his own. He is no onlooker at the world’s sorrow but identifies with the mourners even though it is the weight of his own justly imposed punishment that he feels.

³⁴ The NIV’s *men* presumably arises from accommodating the text of Isaiah to that of [Je. 48:31](#) and reading *’anšē* instead of *’ašišē*. There is no justification for doing this.

9 As Jazer weeps is (lit.) ‘in the weeping of Jazer’. Note the three place-names here in the reverse order of verse 8, integrating the passage. *The shouts of joy (hēdād)*, the traditional vintage shout (**Je. 25:30**), are also the triumphant cry of the victor (**Je. 51:14**). Thus what once signalled Moab’s prosperity (8) is the sound of its ruin, its pride and its downfall in one word.

10 From the land (9) the description passes to the people. The link is *hēdād*, translated *shouting*. Under the infliction of divine wrath all joy is brought to an end. *I have put an end* is the fulfilment of ‘I will bring still more’ in **15:9**.

11–12 This is the final ‘therefore’ (see on verse 7). *My heart ... my inmost being*/‘my intestines ... my inward parts’ denotes the whole emotional centre of the divine nature. His sorrow is no formal ‘This hurts me more than it hurts you’. Here is a deep-seated agony of God, audibly moved (*like a harp*) within. Does ‘Kir-heres’ (NIV, *Kir Hareseth*) and Kir-Hareseth in verse 7 refer to the same place—and are both the Kir of **15:1**? In any case, the content of verse 12 returns to that of **15:1–2**; the religious expression of grief forming an inclusio for the whole poem. Moab may go to *her high place* but *she only wears herself out*; she may *pray* but *it is to no avail*. Once the Lord has been rejected there is no religious alternative, no matter how great the zeal or how valid as such the practice.

Moab’s imminent ruin (**16:13–14**)

This is the second ‘interim fulfilment’ (see p. 135). Moab’s downfall, predicted in **15:1–16:12**, is linked to a time-limit. It is not impossible that these verses originated (cf. **21:11f.**) in response to a Moabite enquiry, for the prophets were sought by foreigners (**2 Ki. 8:7ff.**). In the intense diplomatic activity occasioned by the common Assyrian threat, Isaiah could have published **15:1–16:12** to coincide with a Moabite delegation to Zion in order to share with them his sense of urgency, to impress the policy he would desire to be followed and to urge upon them his awareness that their real foe was not Assyria but their own pride. In such a context, one or more Moabites could well have sought a word from him. On the other hand, as with the ‘foreign oracles’ of the prophets, **15:1–16:12** may have been addressed to an absent audience (Moab) in order to give teaching to a present audience (Judah), to inculcate the lessons of the deadly menace of proud self-reliance and disregard of the divine promises. In either case, the message is now associated with a time-limitation. They will see before their very eyes that

outside the Lord's promises there is no salvation and that pride, inhibiting a spirit of trust, really is a killer. *Says* should be the more emphatic 'has spoken'. The intervening years will be *as a servant bound by contract would count them*/‘like the years of a hired man’. The hired labourer watches the clock, hence *within three years* means ‘three years exactly’. Moab’s pay-day has been fixed. *Splendour/glorious* is used in the bad sense to mean ‘all that Moab glories in’. *And all her many people* is (lit.) ‘in spite of all the multitude’, i.e. Moab’s fall will come in spite of the resources of manpower offering worldly security. The overthrow will be ‘against the odds’, but when the Lord is rejected nothing can save. *Survivors* (*s̄e'ār*) is cognate to the word translated ‘those who remain’ (*s̄e'ērīt*) in 15:9, indicating that the message will be fulfilled. *Very few and feeble* is (lit.) ‘very few, not mighty’, a telling meiosis.

d. Damascus and Ephraim: destruction and preservation, the work of humankind and the work of God (17:1–18:7)

The oracle concerning Damascus (17:1) is a mosaic of five pieces. First, in 17:1–3 Aram and Ephraim are involved in a common fate, stripped of the worldly security of cities, fortifications and royal power. Secondly, 17:4–9 is divided into three parts by ‘In that day’ (verses 4, 7, 9). Jacob will be reduced to gleanings (verses 4–6) but the remnant (verses 7–8) will turn truly to the Lord. Yet the day of their preservation will also be the day (verse 9) of the destruction of all their worldly strength. Thirdly, 17:10–11 is distinct in form, the verbs being second person singular feminine, but (whatever its origin) since verse 10 opens with ‘for’, it now acts as an explanation why this disaster has befallen Ephraim. These three units have a broad unity: the end of the first section ('glory of the sons of Israel', verse 3) is the point at which the second section ('the glory of Jacob', verse 4) begins. The theme of the destruction of cities (verses 1–2, 9) forms an inclusio. The added verses 10–11 use the same harvest motif as verses 4–6.

Fourthly, 17:12–14 has a world setting among ‘nations’ and ‘peoples’ (verses 12–13). The theme is the sudden dispersal of an international threat. Fifthly, 18:1–7 has the same international flavour: envoys travel between nations (verses 1–2) and the whole earth is addressed (verse 3). The Lord is an unobserved watcher (verse 4). Just when the harvest is ready, he will intervene (verses 5–6), and what would have been harvested will be food for the birds and beasts. Then the people to whom the envoys went (verse 7; cf. verse 2) will bring tribute to the Lord in Zion. These two sections are linked together:

formally, by the use of the same opening word, ‘Oh’, ‘Woe’ ([17:12](#); [18:1](#)), and thematically, in that each tells of a sudden divine intervention dispersing threat ([17:14](#)) and bringing a remnant of the world to the Lord ([18:7](#)). There is nothing in all this that is out of place in the context of the Assyrian threat, as far as its point of origin is concerned.

Thus, [17:1–3](#) reveals the same relationship between Ephraim and Aram as [8:1–4](#) and must be dated prior to the fall of Damascus in 732 BC. [17:4](#), [7](#) can be compared with [10:18](#), [20](#) (the thundering of the nations and their unexpected disappointment), and [17:12–14](#) has the Sennacherib incident as its inspiration (cf. [29:1–8](#); [30:27–33](#); [31:4–5](#); [37:36](#)). The intense diplomatic activity of [18:1–2](#) either predicts or meditates upon the large Egyptian investment of effort to activate opposition to Assyria, maybe about 714–711.

Such a wide spread of literature, extending perhaps over twenty or thirty years of Isaiah’s ministry, must have been brought together deliberately, but to what purpose? We note that after [17:1–3](#) specific historical references disappear. Thus, while we may discern Sennacherib and Assyria behind [17:12–14](#) neither he nor his empire is named, and in the same way [18:1–7](#) is now detached from the history which gave it birth. In other words, as throughout these oracle chapters, Isaiah’s concern is with the issues to which history gave expression rather than with the course of events as such.

1. An alliance that failed ([17:1–3](#))

A¹ The destruction of Damascus ([1–2](#))

B¹ The destruction of Ephraim/Israel with Damascus/Aram ([3a](#)) and the glory of Aram with Israel ([3b](#))

2. B² Jacob/Israel: its destruction and its remnant ([4–11](#))

Glory reduced to gleanings ([4–6](#))

People restored to the Lord ([7–8](#))

Destruction and explanation ([9–11](#))

3. A² The world and its remnant ([17:12–18:7](#))

The locus of power in world affairs ([17:12–14](#))

The ultimate use of this power ([18:1–7](#))

Forewarning of the Lord's banner and trumpet (3)

The Lord's patience and precisely timed intervention (4–6)

The world's tribute to the Lord in Zion (7)

An alliance that failed (17:1–3)

For the background to this passage see 7:3–9; 2 Kings 16:1–9. In these verses the people of God, here the northern kingdom, Ephraim, make their first appearance in the oracle sequence (chapters 13:1–20:6). Note that they are not mentioned independently but as linked with Damascus/Aram and are destroyed with them in a joint destruction. This clarifies the place of this oracle in the sequence. As the Lord organizes history for the good of his people (the Babylon oracle) and purposes to keep the Davidic promises (the Philistia oracle), opening them to the Gentiles also (the Moab oracle), his actions under all these headings are holy and just. Sin is not overlooked. The Lord's concern for his people is a holy concern. Consequently, divine judgment touches them also. The particular sin which brings them under judgment is that, against the looming power of Assyria, they have sought security through armed alliance with Aram (see on 7:7–9). The explanation (10) is that this constitutes abandonment of the Lord and the security he affords. Consequently, both they and the strength in which they trust will perish.

1–2 The alternative object of trust, *Damascus*, will be proved insufficient. There is no known *Aroer* in Aram³⁵ and, if the MT text is to be preserved, the alternatives are either to assume an Aramean area not elsewhere mentioned (and chosen by Isaiah to achieve the sort of assonance he loved—^azubōt ^are^ē ^aro^ēr) or to see a reference to Aroer in Gad (Nu. 32:34), which would give verses 1–3 an a-b-b-a pattern of references to Damascus/Aram (1, 3b) and Ephraim (2, 3a). The scene of flocks, which will lie down, with no-one to make them afraid is not one of pastoral bliss but of a landscape emptied of humankind (cf. 5:17).

3 The first two lines of the verse continue the theme of coming destruction. Since *Ephraim* cannot be saved by seeking security in *Damascus*, neither can *Damascus* be

³⁵ Cf. the other cities with the same name, by the Arnon (Nu. 32:34), further north, by Rabbah (Jos. 13:25) and in S. Judah (1 Sa. 30:28).

helped by unbelieving Ephraim. The people of God cannot be made secure by worldly power nor, when they depart from sole reliance on the Lord (10), can they bring a blessing to the world. The last two lines may be either sarcastic or affirmative. If sarcastic, then, since the *glory* of Israel is doomed, the remnant of Aram can but share this doom. The strength of this view is that it prepares so well for verse 4. But more likely, in typically Isaianic fashion, the lines express the unexpected reality of hope: as verses 6–7 will show there will be a remnant of Israel for the Lord (contrary to desert, defying the logic of judgment, against expectation), so also there will be a *remnant of Aram*. In favour of this interpretation is that it is as a matter of fact what the lines say, it accords with the hope content of the oracle as a whole, and it forms an inclusio with an equally surprising note of Gentile hope in 18:7. Thus, in judgment the Lord remembers mercy. For *declares* (*n^eum*) see on 1:24.

Jacob/Israel: its destruction and its remnant (17:4–11)

Glory reduced to gleanings (17:4–6)

This is the first of three ‘In that day’ sections (cf. verses 7, 9). Three pictures of a final end (wasting sickness in verse 4; harvesting in verse 5a; gleaning in verse 5b) suddenly become the hope of a continuing, believing few (6–8).

4 The *glory* is the false glory of worldly power and status (cf. 10:16ff. where Assyrian vainglory is subjected to wasting disease). The picture is of internal forces of dissolution at work; unbelief as a cancer. To *fade* (*✓ dālal*) is ‘to become poor, low, weak’.

5 Now, under the figure of the *reaper*, an external force comes into play. *Standing corn* is the ripe crop ready for the sickle—the action is what is due to the situation, the moment is chosen with exactness.³⁶ *With his arm* denotes a personal act, designed to leave nothing unreaped. As *when a man gleans* should be preceded by ‘And it will be’. A second picture is thus added: after the reaper, the gleaner. Now, surely nothing will remain. So divine justice works its inexorable way. The *Valley of Rephaim* (Jos. 15:8; 18:16) is south of Jerusalem and its mention adds a vivid touch. Isaiah’s hearers would be familiar with the sight as Jerusalem’s poor would have gone gleaning there.

6 *Some gleanings will remain* is a further vivid touch. It was common experience that after reaping and gleaning the tree would not be quite stripped. The really inaccessible

³⁶ For harvest imagery in Isaiah see 9:3–2>; 16:8; 17:11; 18:4f.; 23:3; 37:30.

fruit on the *topmost branches* would remain. Thus, the picture of gleaning, the final blow in verse 5, leaves room for hope. On *beaten* cf. 24:13; Deuteronomy 24:20. The MT, *fruitful boughs*, could be easily altered to a more customary Hebrew form (see BHS) but is just about manageable. It suggests an emphasis like ‘... on its branches, fruitful tree that it is’, i.e. another touch of certainty that there will be a surviving few. In verse 3 the idea of a world remnant was supported by a reference to ‘the LORD Almighty’, here the survival of Israel, against all probability, is guaranteed by him who is *the God of Israel*, the one who has pledged himself to them.

People restored to the Lord (17:7–8)

This is the second ‘In that day’ section and it turns to the question of trust. The eye of expectation and confidence will be fixed solely on the Lord, to the exclusion of every other possible object of religious devotion (cf. 2:8; 31:7).

7 *Men* (*hā'ādām*, ‘mankind’) suggests that Isaiah is thinking more widely than simply Israel, bringing into his view both the surviving few of Israel after the gleaning (6) and the *remnant of Aram* (3). *Look* ($\sqrt{\text{šā'}ā}$; cf. 31:1; Ps. 119:117) is to look with steady regard, hence to keep one’s eye on the Lord as the sole object of confidence. *Maker* is used as a deliberate contrast to the ‘handmade gods’ of verse 8. The God who is the Creator is the only God (Ps. 96:5). The world remnant will acknowledge the one true God and be prepared to forgo even national prestige by recognizing him in *the Holy One of Israel* (see 1:4). For Israel, *Maker* meant more than initial creation; it pointed to the God who made Israel his special people by election and covered them with his redemptive and providential care (e.g. 44:2; 51:13; 54:5; Pss. 95:6; 149:2). *In that day* the remnant will fully realize all that the Lord is and has been to his people. *Turn their eyes*/‘*their eyes will look*’ is the same as in Psalm 123:2. The ‘eye’ stands for desire and expectation (Ps. 25:15) and approval (Ps. 101:6). They will know themselves to be acceptable to the *Holy One* and will give him full approval and confident trust.

8 This verse enforces the lessons of verse 7 by negative statements using the same two verbs. The verbs are now singular, ‘none will look’. The relationship to the Lord is exclusive, strong and confident enough to reject the opposite and incompatible. All false religion, all religion of works, is ultimately an exercise in self-reliance (*the work of their hands and their fingers have made*). This will be completely eradicated *in that day*, along with its support-system of altars, Asherah poles and incense altars. On altars cf. 2 Kings

16:10ff. Wooden *poles* were associated with the worship of the goddess *Asherah* ([2 Ki. 23:6](#)) and were possibly stylized representations of evergreen trees, symbolizing life and fertility.³⁷ *Incense altars* (*hammānîm*; cf. [27:9](#); [Ezk. 6:4ff.](#)) is probably a correct translation. It is not, however, the word used for the authorized incense altar in the temple but is linked with Baal ([2 Ch. 14:5](#) ‘[4](#)’) and ‘high places’ ([Lv. 26:30](#)). The three words speak of the eradication of all man-made ways of drawing near to God (*altars*), of sharing the divine life (*poles*) and of seeking divine favour (*incense*).

Destruction and explanation (17:9–11)

These verses form the final ‘In that day’ section and return to the theme of coming desolation ([9](#); cf. verses [1f.](#)) in order to explain why it has happened ([10f.](#)). *Their strong cities* (‘*arê mā’uzzô*, ‘the cities of his/their stronghold’) are of no avail to people who have forgotten *the Rock, your fortress* (*sûr mā’uzzēk*, ‘the rock of your stronghold’). It is ever the test of the Lord’s people whether or not they are ready to find their strength in him alone. Is it to be the ‘city of stronghold’ or the ‘Rock of stronghold’?

9 The relative clause *which they left because of the Israelites* should qualify *places abandoned to thickets and undergrowth*.³⁸ Undoubtedly, there were still visible in the land the deserted, overgrown ruins of pre-Israelite fortifications. In the halcyon days of Joshua confidence in the Lord proved stronger than these man-made securities. But then the Lord’s people lapsed from confident faith and began to build and to trust what they once destroyed. *In that day*, however, the folly of such security will again be revealed.

10 The NIV omits the opening ‘For’ introducing an explanation. The feminine singular verbs of verses [10f](#) must originally have been addressed to a city (Jerusalem or Samaria) considered as the mother of its inhabitants. *Forgotten* and *not remembered* (cf. [Ps. 78: 11, 42](#)) refer to the failure to keep the mind fixed on God. *God your Saviour* is a

³⁷ See ‘Asherah’ etc. in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, eds. G. J. Botterweck and H. Ringgren (Eerdmans, 1974), vol. 1, pp. 438ff.

³⁸ *Places abandoned to thickets and underbrush* is more literally ‘like the forsaken thing/place of forest and height’—the latter word being that used in verse [6](#) (*topmost branches*). The word itself, however, expresses only the idea of height. Here, the reference is to the overgrown and prominent ruins of pre-Israelite Canaan. The [LXX](#) = ‘of the Hivites and the Amorites’, see the RSV. An all too easy emendation adopted by [BHS](#).

most unsatisfactory rendering of what is ‘the God of your salvation’. In this idiom, ‘salvation’ is not an occasional act but an attribute of God—he is a ‘saving God’, indeed ‘your saving God’. Israel could never say, ‘Ah, but he will not *save* now’, for he is ever the saving God; nor could they say, ‘Ah, but he will not save *us* now’, for he is ‘your saving God’. In the Old Testament ‘rock’ is not just a broad symbol for divine strength, durability etc.³⁹ Its link, as here, with salvation, indicates that it is not a static but a dynamic metaphor, taking its origin in biblical use from Exodus 17, the provident rock from which the saving waters flowed. The Lord as *Rock* is the Lord in his dependable, saving actions, here providing the fortress-like protection which his people need in a menacing world. As indicated above, *fortress* is ‘place of strength’, the same word as in ‘strong cities’ in verse 9. Thus, Isaiah insists that the way of faith is the way of true realism in this world. But instead of this real strength they *set out ... plants* and (lit.) ‘sow foreign seedlings’. What a pathetic thing, how fiddling and futile is false religion and the supposed political realism of armed alliances! They could have had the security of the saving God and the fortress Rock and we find them pricking out seedlings, dabbling in alien cults and foreign alliances. The ‘gardening’ metaphor may be (as 1:29–31) a reference to the practice of fertility religion as a way of prosperity and living strength.

11 No amount of careful effort in these directions can bring benefit, only *incurable pain*. Behind Isaiah’s description of choosing plants that will germinate quickly—growing and budding *on the day* or even *on the morning* they were planted—lies the religious device of ‘sympathetic’ or ‘imitative’ magic. The gods of Canaan were not personal beings but impersonal forces and as such they could not be moved by plea. The only recourse, therefore, was for the worshipper to do something matching what he desired his god to do in the hope of stimulating a corresponding divine action. Thus the sexual rites of Baal worship were aimed at prompting Baal to perform his function of making land, animals and humans fertile. The production here of quick germination was designed to prompt the god to rise to life and action.⁴⁰ Human initiative, seeking to

³⁹ Cf. Dt. 32:4, 15, 18, 30–31; 1 Sa. 2:2; Ps. 19:14–15; 28:1; 62:2–3, 6–7; 78:35; 95:1.

⁴⁰ In the word translated *finest* (*na‘a mānîm*) the NEB finds the name of ‘Adonis’, a ‘dying and rising’ god worshipped by making gardens whose plants (flowering, withering, flowering) reflected his experience. There is no need to follow the NEB, but it is a pointer to the correct understanding of the passage.

provoke divine response, lies at the heart of non-biblical religion and of every perversion of biblical religion. Divine initiative, declarative of the character and intention of God and opening a door for intelligent prayer and responsive faith, is the essence of the Bible's testimony. The NIV's *yet the harvest* depends on an emended text but the MT's stark exclamation is very telling—‘a bumper harvest [lit. ‘a heap, a harvest’] in the day of inheritance! Incurable pain!’. There is a harvest from forsaking the true (10a) and cultivating the false (10b–11), but it is all very different from what was sought and it ends in the helplessness of *incurable pain*.

The world and its remnant (17:12–18:7)

Contextually these two oracles (17:12–14 and 18:1–7) validate the claim, registered especially in verse 10, that in a time of world threat, security is found in the fortress-Lord not in fortress-cities (9). In Isaiah's day the conglomerate Assyrian Empire threatened everyone. As people after people were brought under its sway and contributed fresh forces to its armies, all alike needed to look to whatever they considered to offer them security. For the theocracies of Israel and Judah, was it sensible practical politics simply to trust the Lord? It is thus not hard to see the world of 745–701 BC behind the great poetry of these sections. Since, however, Isaiah does not mention Assyria by name—or indeed any other power—he is addressing himself not to the specific situation but to the principles involved in world history and in facing the threats of world empires. Respectively, 17:12–14 and 18:1–7 answer the question: Who actually rules the world and whose purposes will in the end be accomplished?

The locus of power in world affairs (17:12–14)

It is plain that this oracle had an origin other than where it is now placed for, as it stands, it refers to an unexplained (even if readily understood) *us* (14). Taken, however, as a piece on its own it is a shapely poem on the theme of ‘the voice that rules the world’. Three Hebrew lines lead to the central thought, ‘he rebukes him and he flees afar’ (13b), and this is followed by three lines emphasizing the suddenness and completeness of the dispersal of the threat and the disappointed hopes of the assailant. The Sennacherib incident (chapters 36–37), whether foreseen or recalled, is the perfect background. But, detached from this background, it is a pointed statement on world rule: the metaphor of raging waters symbolizing the gathering tide of attack (12–13a), the commanding voice (13b), and the imagery of chaff in the wind for the attack dispersed (13c; 14).

12 *Oh* (*hôy*) is the same word that opens [18:1](#), and the link between the two oracles should be made clear by uniform translation. ‘Woe to’ is not suited to the second oracle. ‘Oh’ or ‘Ah’, calling attention to the theme of the meditation, would be better. *Raging* and the *raging sea* in particular are images of the restless, hostile world threatening the throne and people of God (cf. [Ps. 93](#)). Sennacherib’s multi-national army (*many nations*; cf. on [10:8](#)) affords a concrete illustration of the notion of international, restless hostility to the Lord and his purposes as found, for example, in [8:9–10](#) and [Psalm 2](#). Here, Isaiah is indicating both what is the inner truth in every historical unrest and what will be pre-eminently true at the eschatological day.

13 The simple word of divine command rules the world ([Pss. 2:4–6; 46:6](#); [Ezk. 1:25](#)) and the same vocabulary expresses divine rule of the ‘forces’ of creation in [Psalm 104:7](#). Contextually, the thought runs beyond excitement at the greatness of such a God to the realism of trusting him amid the threats of this world, however great, however international. *Chaff* is never merely a picture of speed and totality of dispersal but always of swift-acting divine judgment before which its victims are helpless ([29:5](#)). Here it is an excellent foil to the surging threat of the incoming tide ([12](#)).

14 On *evening* and *morning* cf. [37:36](#). [Psalm 30:5](#) relates the evening/morning theme to a facet of the divine nature. [Psalm 46:5](#) could well, like the present oracle, be rooted in the experience of Sennacherib and probably also reflects a dramatic presentation of threat and deliverance used in temple worship. The word *ballâhâ*, translated *sudden terror*, has no necessary idea of suddenness. It comes from *bâlâ* (found only in [Ezr. 4:4](#)) and it is the terror that grips the heart ([Jb. 18:11; 27:20](#)). Thus Sennacherib mesmerized the Judahites with terror—but by *morning*, *they are gone*/‘nothingness of him’, ‘not a sign of him’. Though the purpose of the oracle is to centralize the voice of the Lord and to insist that it is he who, with sublime sovereignty, rules the world, the thought that he does so in the interests and for the well-being of his people is not out of place (cf. [14:1–2](#)).

Whose purposes will be accomplished? (18:1–7)

In 715 the Ethiopian Piankhi mastered Egypt, founded the Twenty-fifth Dynasty and sought to play a part on the world stage. Envoys went to all the Palestinian states promising Egyptian aid in an anti-Assyrian rising. Isaiah mentions neither power but looks through the situation of the day to a wider horizon, not relating historical facts but the principles they embody. Seen on its own terms the world knows no security but collec-

tive strength (1–2a). Isaiah, however, has a better message to share, arising from the principles he has already drawn from the experience of Ephraim and Aram (17:1–11), in whose case collective strength failed (17:1–5). Security can be found only in the Lord (17:7, 10), and one day the remnant will enjoy it (17:3, 6). This is a microcosm of the Lord’s plan for the world. He rules all the nations (17:12–14), and it would be better for the ambassadors of collective security (1–2) to take a different message to the far parts of the earth: to wait for the Lord (3), for he is planning his sudden intervention (4; cf. 17:13f.). The harvest expected from human plans will come to nothing (5–6) but a world remnant will gather to the Lord in Zion (7).

The world on its own terms (18:1–3)

1 For *Woe* see on 17:12. *The land of whirring wings* originally referred to Egypt with its endemic profusion of flying insects, but Egypt is not now mentioned and the *whirring wings* constitute a picture of the busy, restless world. *Along the rivers of Cush* reasonably translates *mē'ēber l'enah^arē kūš*.⁴¹ *Cush* is the upper Nile region, Ethiopia, symbolic of the most far-flung part of the known world. The Ethiopian dynasty of Piankhi (see above) justifies this linking of Egypt and Ethiopia, but Isaiah here allows it to picture the immediate world stretching out to the borders of the remote.

2 Isaiah begins this oracle from an implicitly world-wide perspective, which is continued in the description of *envoys* going *by sea in ... boats over the water*.⁴² This verse sets out the brief given to the envoys. The translation *tall and smooth-skinned* is usually interpreted as a reference to Ethiopia, a proverbially tall people in the ancient world. The reference to *rivers*, recalling the end of verse 1, supports this identification. The efforts of international diplomacy do not stop at the known and easily accessible but reach to earth’s remotest ends. Possibly, the translation should be less specific, i.e. ‘Go ... to a/any nation of long standing and in trim, to a/any people that is to be feared, whether near or far, an/any aggressive nation whose land rivers cross (i.e. that is acces-

⁴¹ The exact wording occurs elsewhere only in Zp. 3:10, where it has to be translated ‘from beyond the rivers of Cush’. The key word ‘ēber’ is always contextually pliant.

⁴² The RSV unnecessarily interprets *sea* as the Nile, and this is supported by Kaiser, who alleges that papyrus boats could not venture beyond the delta. See T. Heyerdahl, *The Ra Expedition* (Penguin, 1970).

sible by water)'.⁴³ This makes the world-view explicit.

3 We may assume that the command in verse 2b was originally the mandate given to the envoys as they left Egypt for foreign courts in the interests of anti-Assyrian diplomacy. In its present context, however, it leads into verse 3, which is Isaiah's world-wide message, not Pharaoh's. We can picture the scene, then, like this: Pharaoh's envoys reach Jerusalem, and Isaiah takes the opportunity to publicize what he would wish them to say to the world and, clothing himself in all his authority as the Lord's prophet, sends them on their way as if they were his envoys. First, he addresses the whole *world* (*tēbēl*; see 13:11). Secondly, he calls the world to wait expectantly for an unmistakable summons—a *banner* (as 11:10) a *trumpet* (cf. 27:13). The visible and the audible combine to give them every opportunity to know what is afoot and to respond (and leaves them without excuse). Thirdly, he appeals to them: 'O do see ... hear it' is more suitable than the equally accurate *you will see ... hear it*.

The Lord's patience and precisely timed intervention (18:4–7)

The opening 'For' (omitted by the NIV) introduces Isaiah's explanation of the message he has put in the envoys' mouths. He has had a word from the Lord (*This is what the LORD says to me*) which makes it more appropriate to wait for him to act than to engage in a frenzy of diplomacy. (Cf. 8:1, 5, 11 for this stress on Isaiah's consciousness of divine revelation.)

4 The Lord watches, unobserved, 'like the glowing heat that comes with light, like the dew-cloud in the heat of harvest'. As naturally and inevitably as there is heat with light and dew in harvest so the Lord is present, unobserved, remaining *quiet*. He watches, not *from* but, 'in my dwelling', for he is not only the transcendent God in heaven but the present God in the affairs of earth. But *heat* and *dew* are not just incidental to harvest, they are actual contributory factors in the ripening. Thus, the Lord is more than a watcher; he presides over the process.

5 The Lord chooses his moment when the harvest is ready. The word of the Lord

⁴³ √ *māšak* ('drawn out') is never found meaning *tall*. 'Long-standing', i.e. having a long record in history, is supported by, e.g. Je. 31:3. *Smooth* (*môrāt*) means smoothed or polished as of a sword sharpened for action (Ezk. 21:9, 29 <14, 13>) and possibly here means 'in battle trim', 'stripped down for action'. *Far and wide* qualifies not *feared* but the command *Go*.

about himself (4) here becomes the word of Isaiah about the Lord; no distinction is intended. In the miracle of inspiration what the Lord says the prophet says, and what the prophet says the Lord has said. Taking verses 5 and 6 together, it is clear that the harvest which the Lord reaps and then leaves for the birds and beasts is that which the implied earth rulers intended to reap for themselves. They have watched their plans maturing but just as they reached out for the sickle to reap their reward, the divine hand preceded them—the sudden act of the real world ruler (*cf.* 17:12–14). This was perfectly illustrated in Sennacherib.

6 The danger will be completely over, with not even sufficient power left to deter the animals making the feast all their own. People's attempts to run the world on the basis of either Assyria-like purposes of imperialism or Egypt-like schemes of collective security will collapse utterly. *All summer* and *all winter* indicates that it will not be a momentary respite from the clash of superpowers but a true end, all the year round.

7 This verse describes the consummation. *At that time* ('ēt; *cf.* the meaning of Gk. *kairos* in the NT) refers not to a 'date' but to the 'season' when it will be suitable and characteristic for *gifts*, specifically 'a homage gift',⁴⁴ to come to the Lord from *people ... far and wide* (*cf.* verse 2b). There will be those world-wide who have waited for the banner to be raised and the trumpet sounded (3), and now they will become pilgrims to the place of the Name of the LORD Almighty ('of hosts'; see 1:9), *i.e. Mount Zion!* The promise of a Gentile remnant was authenticated in the name of 'the LORD Almighty' (17:3), and the gleanings of Ephraim were guaranteed by 'the LORD, the God of Israel' (17:6). The present title, *the LORD Almighty*, completes the series and rounds off the oracle. The omnipotent Lord brings the world home to Mount Zion for there alone he made his name dwell.

e. Egypt: one God, one world, one people (19:1–20:6)

The coherent sequence of the oracles continues. Following on the vision of a remnant of both Gentiles and Israel drawn to the Lord in Zion (chapters 17–18), it remains to be asked on what terms the Gentiles come in. Will it really be with co-equal glory, as 17:3 forecast? To answer this question Isaiah picks the unlikeliest candidate, Egypt, the first and most memorable adversary of the Lord's people. At the climax of the oracle

⁴⁴ For šay, a homage gift, see Pss. 68:29³⁰; 76:11¹².

(19:23–25) he links Egypt with Assyria, the contemporary oppressor. If these two can be bought into co-equality with Israel then the world will be one indeed! The oracle falls into three sections: a poem on the collapse of Egypt (19:1–15), a prose section of five ‘In that day’ statements with Egypt as their subject (19:16–25) and an ‘interim fulfilment’ (20:1–6, see pp. 134f.) involving Assyria and Egypt. Questions have been raised whether all this material can be attributed to Isaiah but neither are the arguments impressive, nor the specialists agreed.⁴⁵ Individual difficulties will be discussed as they arise but there is no insuperable barrier to Isaianic authorship. As the oracle stands, the three sections offer a balanced statement:

A¹ The smiting of Egypt predicted (19:1–15)

B The healing of Egypt (19:16–25)

A² The smiting of Egypt exemplified (20:1–6)

With the disappearance of the northern states, Aram and Israel, into the maw of Assyria, the political centre of gravity in western Palestine moved south and, at least from 715 onwards, Egypt was behind every anti-Assyrian movement. An alliance with Egypt as the means of throwing off the Assyrian yoke and recovering national sovereignty was a constant temptation to the politically ambitious rulers of Judah (see chapters 28–31 and 36–37). Isaiah resolutely opposed this, seeing in Egypt no help but only disaster (cf. 30:6–7). Consequently, the burden of 19:1–15 is an attempt to dissuade them from having any truck with Egypt, based on an exposure of existing and coming disruption in Egyptian affairs, of economic collapse (such as would make aid unlikely if not impossible) and of political obtuseness besetting Egyptian counsellors. There is nothing here that could not have been said by Isaiah at any time in the last fifteen years

⁴⁵ Allegations of non-Isaianic authorship are widespread, originating from Duhm and echoed by, e.g. Kaiser, Wilderberger and Clements. Kaiser is sure that the repetition of the name Egypt in verses 1–4 points to the work of an inferior poet. But there is no reason why this should be a necessary conclusion (cf. Herbert), especially when, as we note, repetition is an idiom throughout this poem. Wilderberger denies verses 5–10 to Isaiah, adducing unusual vocabulary as a reason. This is unconvincing for the topic requires it. One would rather have to prove that it would be impossible or uncharacteristic for Isaiah to provide this sort of local colour in his work and this certainly cannot be done (cf. Mauchline).

of the eighth century, and the perpetually interfering spirit of Egypt would have afforded him ample opportunity to speak out.

The smiting of Egypt predicted (19:1–15)

This section could be set out formally as a poem with three eight-line stanzas (see *BHS*), but a thematic arrangement is more helpful:

A¹ The Lord's action: Egypt helpless, spiritually and nationally (1)

B¹ Social collapse, the purpose of *the LORD Almighty* (2–4)

B² Economic collapse (5–10)

B³ Political collapse, the purpose of *the LORD Almighty* (11–13)

A² The Lord's action: Egypt helpless, spiritually and nationally (14–15)

The abiding message of a passage such as this lies not in its details, which are peculiar to its situation and date, but in its insistence that the problems of society, economics and politics, have a spiritual causation. They are the outworking of divine purposes and are directly traceable to the hand of God, not the outworking of sociological laws, market forces or political fortunes. And it is only by recourse to the Lord that they can be solved.

Introduction (19:1)

The first move of the Lord in judgment is to weaken national morale: religion ceases to move and help and there is a loss of vitality and a spirit of defeatism. The motif of the Lord 'riding on the heavens' expresses divine sovereignty, but the only passage in which the divine rider and the clouds appear is *Psalm 18:10–15*, as the Lord swoops to the rescue of David and the rout of his foes. This is the background here (cf. *Ps. 68:33 <34>*). Egypt, posing as a friend, is a deadly threat to David's kingdom. To sign a treaty, says Isaiah (28:14f.), is to sign your death-warrant, but the Lord is *swift* to come to the aid of his people. For *idols* ('*elilim*, 'no-gods') see on 2:8. Judgment on Egypt's gods is an exodus theme (Ex. 12:12). Before the Lord gods and humans alike are immobilized. To *tremble* ($\sqrt{nûâ}$) is 'to wander, stagger' (e.g. 28:7). Here they are disorientated by the (mere) coming of the Lord. For *melt* see on 10:18.

Social collapse (19:2–4)

As national spirit collapses (1) divine action provokes social division (2), frustration sets in (3a) and nothing goes according to plan (3b). There is declension into religious quack-

ery (3c) and the country falls under dictatorship (4).

2 The initial ‘For’ (omitted by the NIV) introduces an explanation of verse 1b: divine action (*I will stir up*) fractures society. The original division into the kingdoms of Upper and Lower Egypt will reappear. Thus the picture is complete: individual against individual, city against city, north against south.

3 *The Egyptians will lose heart*/‘the spirit of Egypt will be devastated’, i.e. go into shock. The NASB translates this as ‘demoralized’. This loss of nerve will be fed by divine action frustrating every proposal for national recovery. The verb *I will bring* is ‘I will swallow up’, i.e. make to disappear as if they never existed (cf. 3:12). As ever in such a time, cults will thrive with their futile ‘seeking’ (see 8:19) of those that are ‘no-gods’ and pathetic trust in the dead (*’itîm* is found only here—in cognate languages it means ‘ghosts’). For *mediums* and *spiritists* see on 8:19.

4 Finally, there is dictatorship. The fulfilment may have been the ‘Ethiopian’ Pharaoh Piankhi (715), the conquests of Sargon II (cf. 20:1ff.) or Sennacherib, or the invasion and conquest of Egypt by Esarhaddon (680), Ashurbanipal (668), or the Persian Artaxerxes III Ochus (343). Note the continuing stress on divine action (*I will hand ... over*). For the seventh time the name Egypt is mentioned (obscured in the NIV by the needless translation *Egyptians*): ‘seven times in four verses as though by sheer repetition to nail down the judgment’ (Herbert). On *declares* (*n̄um*) see 1:24.

Economic collapse (19:5–10)

The Nile is referred to by name five times and by a synonym four times. Repetitiveness is a stylistic feature of this poem. The Nile was the basis of Egypt’s proverbial productivity. The drying up of the Nile (5) is a figurative description of coming economic decay—such a decay as would make one wonder if the Nile had gone! But the cause is the breakdown of national morale (1–3). When a nation’s spirit evaporates and sectional interests predominate, when no plan seems to prosper, then the means to make industry thrive may well be there (and the Nile flow as before) but the will to exploit the asset is gone.

5 *Of the river* is (lit.) ‘from the sea’, describing the Nile as Egypt’s private ‘sea’. *River bed*/‘a river’ is an idiom of indefiniteness for the sake of emphasis, hence ‘the very River itself’.

6 The *canals* and *streams* are the irrigation channels which distributed the waters of

the Nile throughout the land.

7 *River* should be ‘Nile’ so that the name comes three times in this verse, stressing the enormity of the calamity. The picture of the collapse of the economic basis of Egypt’s life is carried faithfully through. First the failure of water, then the decline of agriculture and, finally, soil erosion (the fields will *blow away*/‘be driven away’).

8 This verse describes the collapse of the fishing industry. Methods of fishing using both *hooks* and *nets* are depicted on Egyptian monuments.

9 The growing of *flax* and the art of weaving *linen* were well advanced in Egypt. The rot reaches out to destroy the manufacturing industries.

10 There is a problem of translation here. *Workers in cloth* depends on an emendation (from *šatōt̄eyhā* to *šeñt̄eyhā*; see *BHS*). As it stands the *MT* means ‘pillars’ or ‘foundations’ (*cf.* 20:4, ‘buttocks’; Ps. 11:3). If a metaphorical sense (unexemplified elsewhere) can sensibly be allowed, it would mean the ‘pillars’ of society (*cf.* ‘cornerstones’ in verse 13 and the similar use of ‘support’ in 3:1). In this case, the verse rounds off the section by noting the failure of morale in those who undergird industrial enterprise and *the wage earners* they employ.

Political collapse (19:11–13)

Within the ‘Cabinet’ folly reigns supreme. The idiom of repetition continues: ‘wise’ occurs three times, ‘princes’ three times, ‘counsel’ (noun and verb) three times, ‘Egypt’, four times and ‘fool’ occurs as both a noun and verb. The idea of folly forms an inclusio in verses 11 and 13. The leaders are unenlightened for all their claims (11); they cannot read the signs of the times (12) and can only mislead (13).

11 The verse opens dramatically with two exclamations: ‘What fools the officials of Zoan! The wisest of Pharaoh’s counsellors—unenlightened counsel! Fools (*“ewilim*) are the downright stupid people, unable even to see the danger in their own actions (Ps. 107:17; Pr. 1:7; 10:21). *Zoan* in the north-eastern Delta ‘was the effective capital of Egypt in the Twenty-first to Twenty-third Dynasties, and the northern base of the Ethiopian Twenty-fifth dynasty.’⁴⁶ *The wise* would be better translated as ‘the wisest’. *Give senseless advice* translates *√bā’ar*, which describes one untouched by true wisdom, living on the level of animal thoughtlessness (Ps. 73:22; *cf.* Ps 49:20 <21>). Pharaoh’s *counsellors*

⁴⁶ See K. A. Kitchen, ‘Zoan’ in the *IBD*.

‘are unenlightened’. Wisdom in Egypt was a ‘caste’ matter and so Pharaoh’s counsellors are scorned for claiming an impeccable pedigree (*How can you ...?*).

12 Yet again it is stressed that the Lord is the executive agent in history. Isaiah is either claiming here that a truly wise person would recognize that it is Israel’s God (*the LORD Almighty*) who is implementing his plans and would also know what those plans are, or else he is using ‘shorthand’ to say that he knows it is *the LORD Almighty* and they should at least discern how things are shaping out. *Show you and make known* is (lit.) ‘Do let them tell you and know’. *Make known* is a tiny emendation which may be correct. ‘Know’ expresses, however, a distinct idea—they cannot tell, they do not even know. *Planned* is really ‘counselled’.

13 For *fools* and *Zoan* see on verse 11. *Memphis*/‘Noph’ in the southern Delta was a former capital of Egypt. *Deceived* ($\sqrt{nāšā}$; cf. 36:14; 37:10) is used of the action of the serpent in Genesis 3:13. *Cornerstones* is used metaphorically for ‘chiefs’ (Jdg. 20:2), ‘leaders’ (1 Sa. 14:38), etc.

The Lord’s action (19:14–15)

14 The poem opened as the Lord approached Egypt. Now, he is at work within the leaders, imparting a *spirit of dizziness* or bewilderment/dithering. The word (*‘iw’im*) occurs only here. *Stagger* ($\sqrt{‘āwā}$) has the root idea of ‘deviation’ (cf. 21:3). The idea, therefore, is of leaders ‘not knowing which way to turn’. Such is one aspect of the holy, judgmental activity of the Lord (1 Ki. 22:21–23; 2 Thes. 2:11).

15 See on 9:14–15. Leader and led, high and low, are all alike impotent to solve Egypt’s problem.

The healing of Egypt (19:16–25)

The apparently unrelenting opposition of the Lord to Egypt in the foregoing poem stands in a wonderful contrast to the present passage on the restoration of Egypt and its gathering into the people of God. The conjunction of ‘smiting’ and ‘healing’, which provides titles for the two sections, appears in verse 22. We have seen the one side of divine action, here is the other. As Isaiah addressed his contemporaries his main thought in verses 1–15 was to expose the folly of an alliance with Egypt. To join with Egypt would be to associate with a nation under divine wrath (1), trust the promises of a divided people (2), look for help to a collapsing economy (5–10), expect wisdom where there was only folly (11–13) and believe that those who were unable to solve their own

problems (15) could solve the problems of others! A devastating critique! But Isaiah's use of verses 1–15 in its present context has a deeper purpose. Egypt stands for the Gentile world, heading into irreversible decline. Its real problem is divine opposition and yet no sins are specified such as would explain the Lord's hostility. In a word, we have here the situation, first seen at Babel (Gn. 11), where humankind's determination to be the solution to their own problems and to run the world without God automatically comes under disapproval and counter-attack. But divine opposition is not the last word; alongside the world's problem (1–15) the prophet places the Lord's solution (16–25). It is a point-by-point reply, couched in five 'In that day' oracles:

Smiting (1–15)	Healing (16–25)
The fear of the Lord (1)	The fear of the Lord (16–17)
Confusion, disunity (2)	One language, one Lord (18)
	Reconciliation (19–22)
Consulting the no-gods (3)	Crying to the Lord (20)
A fierce king (4)	The healing Lord (22)
	Harmony in worship (23)
The Nile dried in judgment (5)	Highway for unity (<i>cf. 11:15–16</i>) (23)
	Co-equality in the Lord (24–25)
A spirit of bewilderment (14)	Divine blessing

The fear of the Lord (19:16–17)

Like each of this series of five oracles this, the first, looks forward to the undated future *In that day*. What turns out to be the beginning of blessing is to all appearances only more trouble (*cf. 6:7*): fear that divine power is roused against them (*the uplifted hand*), fear of *Judah*, fear of what the Lord *is planning against them*. Mauchline notes that at the time of Sennacherib's invasion (701) Egypt made its sole attempt to redeem its promises to Judah. It put an army in the field and was repulsed at Eltekeh, north of Ashdod. But almost immediately, by divine intervention and without human hand, the power which defeated them was itself utterly humbled. He comments: 'Surely there we have circum-

stances, within Isaiah's lifetime, which are better fitted than any other of later date to evoke the fear of Yahweh and of Judah.⁴⁷ On this basis it is reasonable to think of Isaiah probing forward to 'that day' and seeing it in terms of an act of God which will strike awe into the world. In any case, world-wide fear of the Lord, in the day of the Lord, is part of the tradition within which Isaiah lived (e.g. Ps. 96:9; 97:2–5; cf. Mt. 28:3–4; Lk. 21:26; Acts 2:43; 19:17; Rev. 6:12ff.). *The uplifted hand* is (lit.) 'The shaking of the hand ... which he is going to shake'. *Judah*, the people for whom God performs such wonders, share in the awe his act excites. At this stage all they know is dread of what may lie ahead; they do not yet know that *what the LORD Almighty is planning* is their welfare and that their fear is the beginning of wisdom. The title *the LORD Almighty* runs through this series of oracles (18, 20, 25) and forms a link with the foregoing poem (4, 12).

One language, one Lord (19:18)

The details of this second 'In that day' oracle remain impenetrable, but the thrust of the oracle is clear and suitable. Following on the fear of the Lord (16–17) there is a turning to the Lord marked first by the adoption of *the language of Canaan*.⁴⁸ The verbal form *will speak* emphasizes continuance and hence means 'will adopt'. It is typical of Isaiah (cf. 6:5, 7) that the foremost mark of true religion is speech (cf. Jas. 1:26). The expression is 'the lip of Canaan', and it looks back to Isaiah's own experience and reflects the beginning of a return to the state where 'the whole earth was one lip' (Gn. 11:1; cf. verse 24). The second mark of this turning to the Lord is sworn allegiance to him. Hebrew makes a distinction between 'to swear by' (*b^e*), the basis of assurance on which an oath rests, and 'to swear to' (*l^e*), the person to whom the promise is made. (See both usages in e.g. 45:23; Ex. 32:13.) Here, therefore, the meaning is of making one's promise of allegiance to the

⁴⁷ Mauchline, pp. 160–161. Kaiser thinks of 323 BC when southern Syria was occupied by Ptolemy and thinks the author expected a drying up of the Nile which would remind the Egyptians of the plagues and make them fear divine wrath! But the plagues did not include a drying up of the Nile.

⁴⁸ Many commentators assume that the reference must be to Judahite immigrants into Egypt, whereby worshipping voices would be heard in the land. Attention is called, for example, to the four cities of Je. 44:1 where Judahite fugitives settled. But apart from the fact that the fugitives in Je. 44 were more interested in the Queen of Heaven (44:17ff.) than in the Lord, the plain expectation of the present passage is that it is Egypt that turns to worship the Lord.

Lord. Thus Egypt begins the process of turning to the Lord which the remaining ‘In that day’ oracles develop. But beyond this Isaiah mentions details doubtless meaningful to himself which we no longer understand. Is *five* to be understood as referring to five specific cities or is it used in the sense of ‘a few’ (*cf. 17:6; 30:17*)? Or is Isaiah recalling the five cities overthrown in Joshua’s first major campaign, seen as an earnest of the coming total conquest (*Jos. 10:22–43*)? Kissane proposes this last view, and it would not be unsuitable to a prophet like Isaiah who loves to draw on historical traditions, but it does seem a trifle obscure as a reference without further explanation. And why is *one* (or ‘each’, as in e.g. *Ex. 36:30; Nu. 7:3, 85*) called the *City of Destruction*? Uncertainty of text here does not help, but even if we were to adopt alternative texts (‘City of the Sun’, ‘City of Righteousness’) we would be no nearer an understanding.⁴⁹ Yet amid all this obscurity the oracle fills a clear role in the sequence. With small beginnings even Egypt will begin to participate in the unity of God’s world-wide people and to make its commitment to the Lord.

Reconciliation (19:19–22)

⁴⁹ The *MT heres* is not found elsewhere but is a soundly formed noun meaning ‘destruction’. *Q^a* reads *heres* (‘the sun’), and the *LXX* has ‘the city of Asedek’, which is presumably a transliteration of the Hebrew *hašsedeq* meaning ‘righteousness’. But why should the *LXX* transliterate rather than translate such a well-known word? This shakes any confidence that one might have had that the Hebrew text ever read ‘righteousness’. The difference between the *MT* and *Q^a* is minute. It is easier to imagine a change from the *MT* to *Q^a* than vice versa, especially since the Egyptian city Heliopolis (‘City of the Sun’) is well known. Gray urged that an original ‘righteousness’ was changed to ‘destruction’ to remove the objectionable view that Egypt would be so favoured. What nonsense! The bold editor would have had to rewrite the whole passage. But, however regrettable such a procedure might be, the unfavourable ‘destruction’ could have been altered to ‘righteousness’ to remove the only word in the passage at all hostile to Egypt. But the only point in saying all this is to show what a world of supposition we have entered. We are on solid ground, however, in saying that ‘will be called’ (*cf. 4:3; 61:6*) indicates that a new name is being given to highlight a new situation. This rules out Heliopolis. Delitzsch notes that $\sqrt{hāras}$ is sometimes used of destroying idols *Jdg. 6:25; 1 Ki. 19:10, 14* and urges that the cities acquire their new name by purging themselves of former objects of worship. This suits the context but is a clutching after straws.

What began to be true in the case of the five cities will come to be true of the whole, from *the heart*/‘the middle’ to *its border*. Reciprocity of relationship is the keynote: prayer finds a response (20); revelation leads to acknowledgment, worship and fidelity (21); divine discipline leads to repentance (they will *turn to the LORD*) and plea is answered in healing (22). There are five marks of true religion:

1. The *altar*. This was the place of reconciliation (19–20a; cf. 6:6f.). The *border monument* (*masēbâ*) marks the place where the Lord dwells (Gn. 28:16–19) and his sphere of influence (Gn. 31:51f.), but (lit.) ‘in the midst’ was an *altar*. As well as being a place of sacrifice and therefore of the reconciliation of the sinner to the holy God, this altar was *a sign and witness*. This recalls the altar built by the returning Transjordanian tribes (Jos. 22) lest in the future the barrier of the Jordan might separate them from the unity of the people of God. Their altar was a witness (Jos. 22:34) to the reality of their membership of Israel. So it will be for the Gentiles, symbolized here by Egypt.
2. Prayer. The Egyptians are to have a speaking relationship with the Lord (20b). Isaiah’s thought moves from the book of Joshua to Judges (e.g. Jdg. 3:9; 1 Sa. 12:10–11). The Egyptians are to be brought into living fellowship with the Lord and find that prayer is the effective way of dealing with life’s problems, however ‘real’.
3. Revelation. The Lord will reveal himself and, as a result, they (lit.) ‘will know the LORD’ (21a). True religion is not people searching for God but people responding to revealed truth.
4. Service. This will have both public expression (*sacrifices and grain offerings*) and personal commitment (*they will make vows to the LORD and keep them*) (21b). *Worship* is (lit.) ‘serve’.
5. Providential discipline. Those whom he loves he chastens (Pr. 3:12). So, verse 22 is (lit.) ‘And the Lord will smite Egypt, smiting and healing’. The purposeful discipline of the Lord is part of life under his care, designed, as here, to make them *turn to the LORD*, i.e. come back as penitents (cf. on 1:26), looking trustfully to him in prayer and receiving his remedial care.

Harmony in worship (19:23)

The true bearing of the oracles which have focused on Egypt is that Egypt is a ‘case in point’ of the Lord’s purpose to unite the world in his worship. True religion heals wounds between people. The late eighth century BC was full of the tension between the

two would-be superpowers, Egypt and Assyria, but what worldly ambition sunders religion based on revelation (as above; cf. 2:2–4) unites. This is the third stage in the spreading kingdom of peace: first a few cities (18), then a whole country (19), now the whole world. The emphasis here rests on the oneness people feel with each other and the free expression they give to it.

The *highway* (*m^esillâ*, ‘a causeway or raised road’, visible and unmistakable) expresses possibility of access. The free, mutual movement between *Egypt* and *Assyria* shows *the Egyptians* and *the Assyrians* enjoying it. *Worship together* expresses the ground of their unity, the magnetism which unites them: they accept each other because each has been accepted by the Lord (cf. Rom: 14:1–3).

Co-equality with the Lord (19:24–25)

The final ‘In that day’ section is the capstone. The fellowship they feel (23) is objectively ratified as the Lord says *Egypt my people, Assyria my handiwork and Israel my inheritance*. At the start Judah was an object of fear to the Egyptians (17). This is correct, for true acknowledgment of the Lord means acknowledgment and submissiveness to those who are already his people (cf. 1 Cor. 14:24–25). But the convert at once enjoys a co-equal membership. The three titles *people*, *handiwork* and *inheritance* have always belonged to Israel. In Egypt the word once was ‘Let my people go’ (Ex. 5:1), but now *Egypt* is *my people*. Nothing could more wonderfully signalize what God has wrought.⁵⁰

The smiting of Egypt: an interim fulfilment (20:1–6)

On interim fulfilments see pp. 134f. For the third time, Isaiah offers a fulfilment within the immediate future, which when people see it happening will provide ground for their faith in the Lord’s greater and wider purposes. The Assyrian campaign against Ashdod (1) took place in 711. For the previous four years Egypt had been unsettling the western Palestinian states with promises of aid should they rise against Assyria, and by 713 Ashdod was in rebellion. As a consequence, Assyria deposed its king and put another in his place, but Ashdod was not to be deterred. The new king was ousted and

⁵⁰ At no date later than Isaiah would it have been meaningful to speak of bringing Israel, Egypt and Assyria into one. At no other time could Egypt and Assyria have been used as compendious names for world power, whose conversion would symbolize a whole world gathered in peace into the unity of the people of God.

(with the evil genius of Egypt looming in the background) envoys were sent to call Judah, Edom and Moab to join the rising. Since Hezekiah suffered no Assyrian reprisals at this time he probably held aloof; it could even be that he was swayed by Isaiah's views as expressed in chapter 18. But Ashdod did not escape. Sargon II, now at the height of his power, sent his *supreme commander* (1). Ashdod was reduced and became an Assyrian province. Egypt, true to form, reneged on its promises. At some time in all this Isaiah initiated an acted oracle by going about *stripped and barefoot* (2). His intention in miming the plight of captives was to expose the futility of trusting Egypt. When this fate came upon Egypt before his audience's very eyes (5–6) they would realize the hopelessness of the policy they had adopted. Such was the historical setting of Isaiah's acted oracle. He visibly committed himself to the veracity of the word given to him and they would see it fulfilled. But why does he include it here in his collected works? He has been outlining a world-wide hope (19:16–25) in which three nations of his own day have figured: his own people, the imperial Assyria and the would-be imperial Egypt. His vision for them has been astounding—the two superpowers would be joined to tiny Judah as one people in one world under one God (19:23–25). Is this credible? To prove that it is, Isaiah records an incident showing that precisely these world empires—in the heyday of their power—are subject to the word of the Lord. Nothing, therefore, is impossible. What is of significance is not a human estimate of what can happen but that the Lord has spoken.

1 In the year, i.e. 711 BC. The *supreme commander* is the 'tartan', i.e. 'second' (to the king; cf. 2 Ki. 18:17). Sargon II was one of the greatest of the Assyrian kings and reigned 722–705 BC.

2 At that time could be 'during that period' (cf. 18:7). Time ('ēt) refers to the suitability of the period rather than to a precise date. Spoke could be 'had spoken'. We do not know at what point Isaiah's acted oracle fitted into the sequence of events. Sackcloth was apparently Isaiah's normal wear. Was it the sackcloth of mourning (15:3) or the rough garment worn by prophets (2 Ki. 1:8)? Stripped is (lit.) 'naked'. Did Isaiah really go 'naked' or is the NIV correct in safeguarding the proprieties with *stripped*? The general use of the word ('ārōm) suggests the former. Come what may, he paid the price of obedience by embodying the word he was given.

3 Then/‘and’ the LORD said, i.e. when Ashdod fell, at which point Isaiah had been act-

ing out his message for *three years*. Thus, all through the period of intense Egyptian anti-Assyrian diplomacy the people had watched Isaiah, wondering what his behaviour portended. Since they would have known his mind on the topic of rebellion, they may have assumed that from the start he was telling them the rebels were doomed and would go captive before Assyria. But no. The word of the Lord concerned Egypt herself (linked with *Cush* because the Ethiopian dynasty was in power). It was captive Egyptians Isaiah was forecasting. We can sense the element of drama in the announcement. Since (as we might say) any fool could have predicted that Ashdod's rebellion would come to grief, we can hear the wiseacres saying, 'What a lot of fuss about the obvious! Tell us something we don't know!' The message was not what they expected nor, enamoured as the politicians of Jerusalem were with Egypt, what they wanted to hear. But it came with doubled force: the word of explanation and the prolonged act of embodiment of the message.

4 Isaiah did not predict the conquest of Egypt but simply the sad sight of strings of captives being deported. This would have been the case after the battle of Eltekeh (701), Egypt's one essay against Assyria. Since this was before Sennacherib's invasion of Judah it could well have contributed to Hezekiah's extreme despondency ([37:1–4](#)), just as Isaiah said it would. *To Egypt's shame* is (lit.) 'the nakedness of Egypt!' The state of the captives exposed the state of the nation.

5–6 These verses are (lit.) 'And they will be shattered and reap shame because of Cush, their ground of confidence, and because of Egypt, their boast, and the inhabitants of this coastline will say in that day, "Look, such is our ground of confidence whither we fled for help, to be delivered from the king of Assyria, and how shall we ourselves escape?"'

2. The second cycle of oracles. The world in the shadows (

[21:1–23:18](#))

Isaiah continues to build oracles from many different points of origin into a mosaic world-view. The first cycle ([13:1–20:6](#)) is marked by buoyant certainty: the world is in the Lord's hands and his promises will be fulfilled. This second cycle offers a complete contrast. It begins with a vision of judgment from which Isaiah recoils in horror ([21:3](#)) and proceeds to a lone voice in the darkness and a prediction of darkness yet to come

(21:11f.). It reveals a Gentile world seeking but not finding help (21:13ff.) and accuses the people of God of an unforgivable sin (22:14). Its one note of hope is a tribute to the Lord from Tyre, but even this is at the end of an oracle of devastation (23:18). Thus, as Isaiah probes forward into the future he sees the world becoming darker. History does not ‘every day in every way become better and better’. Divine judgments become starker, needs become deeper and more insoluble, the people of God are beset by a spirit of self-sufficiency and this-worldliness. Isaiah is not departing from his confidence in the promises of God, but he is relating them, realistically, to ever more desperate situations as time goes on. In this series Isaiah uses cryptic titles for four of the five oracles. In each case the oracle can in fact be identified with a place, but the cryptic element in the title means, as we shall see, that the place in question is not considered as a historical entity but as the embodiment of a topic or principle.

a. *The Desert by the Sea (Babylon): the fall of the gods (21:1–10)*

The reference to Babylon in verse 9 is usually thought to determine the date to which this oracle refers: the city’s fall to Cyrus in 539. In consequence, the composition of the oracle is dated in some proximity to that event. This view is supported by the reference to the Medes in verse 2, who were associated with the Persians in conquering Babylon. The careless revelry of verse 5 also suits what is known of Babylon at the moment of its fall (*cf. Dn. 5*). But things are actually not quite so clearcut.

1. Verses 1–2a suggest familiarity with weather conditions in the Negeb and, therefore, a Palestinian rather than a Babylonian location for the author.
2. The activities of Elam and Media in verse 2 cannot be restricted to the fall of Babylon in 539. They were on and off stage all through the Assyrian and Babylonian periods.
3. There is no reason why the fall of Babylon to Persia should be a matter of anguish (verses 3–4) to the prophet and a ‘dire vision’ (verse 2) to be reported to the ‘crushed’ people of God (verse 10).
4. Careless eating and drinking (verse 5a) is found in 22:13 as a motif for the complacent and blinkered spirit of Jerusalem. Its suitability to Babylon on the night of its fall could be no more than coincidental.
5. The fall of Babylon in 539 was only one of many endured by the city and has no prescriptive right to be the one referred to here. It fell to Sargon II in 710, to Sennacherib in 702 and 689, and to Assurbanipal in 648. Throughout this period Elam

and Media were involved, but on Babylon's side.

The call to arms in verse 2 does not have to refer to Cyrus's attack in 539. An entirely different scenario is possible and preferable. Erlandsson argues persuasively that this oracle relates to the fall of Babylon in 689, which certainly, for ferocity, matched what Isaiah forecast. Sennacherib records that he filled the city with corpses, 'the gods dwelling therein—the hands of my people took them and ... smashed them.' The buildings and walls were razed and, says Erlandsson, 'his final gesture was to have huge volumes of water released over the ruins ... to obliterate every trace of that city which had been constantly in revolt.'⁵¹

The whole oracle can be understood from this perspective. The key is the ever-restless figure of Merodach-Baladan. In the years 722–710 and 705–702 this inveterate foe of Assyria secured the independence of Babylon and even made it a major threat to the continuation of the Assyrian Empire. He thrust his attentions upon Judah by the embassy he sent, ostensibly as a courtesy to the recuperating Hezekiah but actually to seek Judahite partnership in the anti-Assyrian cause. Hezekiah's welcoming response received an immediate reply from Isaiah (chapter 39), but the present oracle is Isaiah's considered response, his major attempt to turn Judah from an alliance with what he sees as a doomed Babylon. The oracle plays the same role in relation to Merodach-Baladan and Babylon as 19:1–15 does in relation to the Egyptian alliance, stressing the pointlessness, even in political terms, of an alliance with a doomed cause. In this light the passage can be reviewed as follows.

To start with, a picture forms in Isaiah's mind of whirlwinds coming one after the other across the Negeb by the Dead Sea. He becomes aware that the message behind the picture is dire (verses 1b–2a). Then, as if he were present, he hears what Merodach-Baladan's ambassadors said to Hezekiah and his 'Cabinet', that Assyria the traitor and looter cannot any longer be tolerated and that Elam and Media are ready to take up arms. Merodach-Baladan is confident he can put an end to the groaning Assyria has caused (verse 2b–d). What is coming fills Isaiah with pain and terror, even though the twilight of Assyrian power was something he had longed for (verses 3–4).

The sounds coming from the palace, however, are very different. The complacent politicians are celebrating their alliance with Merodach-Baladan at a banquet and it is as

⁵¹ Erlandsson, p. 91.

if Isaiah can overhear the well-fed, confident militarism of their after-dinner speeches (verse 5). In explanation of his violent reaction Isaiah reveals a secret which he has been told. It is as if he had appointed a lookout and given him something to watch for. But when eventually the given sign materialized it brought with it the announcement of the total fall of Babylon (verses 6–9). This message is faithfully reported. Crushed as Judah is under Assyria, it is no solution to link itself with doomed Babylon (verse 10).

Thus, with no more ‘reading between the lines’ than highly charged, allusive poetry always requires, the oracle becomes a pertinent message to Hezekiah and his advisers. But, as ever, in this section of Isaiah we must ask another question. Isaiah does not entitle the oracle with reference to Merodach-Baladan etc. but offers the cryptic title *Concerning the Desert by the Sea*. What purpose does the oracle fulfil in its present setting? Kaiser replies: ‘It seems to draw upon these events in order to portray the imminent fall of the world-city ... the onset of the woes of the final age which precedes salvation.’⁵² This is exactly right. In this scheme of oracles (see p. 171) the actual Babylon of 13:1–14:23 here becomes the city behind the cryptic title and finally the ‘ruined city’ of 24:10, symbolizing humankind’s ultimate attempt to organize the world without reference to God. It is this doom that is coming and it gives no joy to any beholder. Its onset is pushed out into the undated future, as the lookout’s prolonged wait suggests (verse 8), and in the meantime the Lord’s people remain crushed (verse 10). In these oracles interpretation must proceed on both the level of the original setting and the level of the new context in which the original truth comes to a wider and more mature flowering.

The shape of the oracle is as follows:

A¹ A vision received (1b–2a)

B¹ An end envisaged (2b)

C¹ A reaction of horror (3–4)

C² A reaction of pleasure (5)

B² An end accomplished (6–9)

⁵² Kaiser dates the prophecy after the fall of Babylon in 539 and thinks that it is the events of that fall on which the poet draws to create his picture of the end time. It is difficult, however, to see how a poet could transpose the bloodless fall of Babylon to Cyrus into this *dire vision* or why it should be a grim, joyless duty to convey the news to his people.

A² A message reported (10)

In its form the oracle originally focused on the contrasting reactions of Isaiah and the politicians. As it is now placed its focus is on the abiding issue facing the people of God: do they see their way forward in terms of accommodation to the world and its methods or do they react with horror to the thought of an association with that which is doomed (*cf.* 52:11–12; Rev. 18:1–4)?

1 Erlandsson notes that *the Desert by the Sea* could be a Hebrew equivalent to the Akkadian *mat tamtim* ('the land of the sea'), the area around the Persian Gulf, *i.e.* Merodach-Baladan's habitat. This makes a neat link between the oracle and its point of origin, while its teasing title detaches it from too close an involvement with the situation which gave it birth. It is simpler, however, to think in terms of the Negeb, which was an environment familiar to Isaiah and may even have been the place where the vision was granted. *Sweeping through* is probably 'in [their] coming one after another'. *The invader* is an NIV interpretative addition. The Hebrew expresses the vague terror of 'It comes' or 'Something is coming'. A *land of terror* (*nôrâ'â*, 'a dreaded land') is as in Deuteronomy 8:15.

2 *Dire* (*qâšâ*, 'hard, harsh') as in 1 Kings 12:4, means burdensome, insupportable. *The traitor betrays, the looter takes loot*/‘The betrayer betrays and the destroyer destroys’ was originally a reference to Assyria (see 33:1). In its present setting it depicts the moral unreliability of the world—people cannot be trusted and property is not respected. The presence of *Elam* is a problem for those who link and date the oracle with the 539 BC Persian overthrow of Babylon for, as Kaiser admits, Elam ‘ceased to be a serious opponent of the Mesopotamian empires as early as 639 BC.’ He solves his problem by saying that the name ‘emphasises the primacy of the Persians over the Medes’, but he does not explain how it can do this.⁵³ It is more exact to date the oracle at the time of Merodach-Baladan’s embassy and to hear behind the assonatal cry, ‘*alî 'êlām*’ ('Up, Elam'), the ambassadors’ assurance of Elam’s readiness to join the rebellion on Babylon’s side. Detached from its original context, it notes the continuance of the appeal to military solutions. *I will bring* is the perfect of certainty, meaning ‘I am determined to ...’. It was originally a promise made in the name of Merodach-Baladan; now it represents the hypothetical voice of the continuing line of ‘Merodach-Baladans pledging to overthrow

⁵³ Kaiser, p. 124.

oppressive systems and to bring in a golden age.⁵⁴

3–4 The same imagery of suffering is used in the parallel Babylon oracle in the first series (13:7–8). The ‘Therefore’ with which verse 3 opens (omitted by the NIV) links Isaiah’s reaction with the *dire vision* of verse 2a and looks forward to the further explanation which ‘For’ at the beginning of verse 6 (again, omitted by the NIV) introduces. Physically (3) and emotionally (4a) Isaiah goes into shock. *Racked ... staggered ... bewildered* is (lit.) ‘full of pain ... racked/twisted ... terrified’. *Twilight* (cf. Je. 13:16 where the NIV has ‘darkness’) is the time of divine judgment. Isaiah confesses he had longed to see the Lord come and put the world to rights but the *dire vision* has revealed the other side of such an intervention; not what it will mean for the saved but what it will mean for the lost (cf. 2 Thes. 1:6–10). He has seen the *horror* inseparable from the day of the Lord. On one level the horror is what is coming to the historical Babylon, with which Hezekiah is busy allying himself. On the level at which the oracle is now operating, however, it is the ultimate horror of the Lord’s final dealing with sin, its agents (natural and supernatural) and the world system in which it is embodied—the spiritual Babylon of Revelation 18–19.

5 In this verse, by contrast, a scene of complacency and self-satisfaction is sketched in with four bold infinitives: the laying of tables, the spreading of rugs (arranging of seating), the eating, the drinking. Historically, this is the banquet welcoming Merodach-Baladan’s ambassadors. With *Get up ... oil the shields* Isaiah makes as if he were overhearing the after-dinner speeches. Those speaking easily use the terminology of a holy war for, after all, are they not going to settle once and for all with the atrocious Assyrians? And this too is part of Isaiah’s horror: lightly, thoughtlessly the people of God identify with the world, with a Babylon which Isaiah knows can offer no solution but is itself doomed (see on 13:17 and 21:1–10). But on the deeper level, verse 5 is a picture of a church content with the pleasures of this world, fighting its battles with carnal weapons. A church identifying with the world system which Babylon represents and at the end caught up in Babylon’s judgment (cf. Rev. 18:1–4).

⁵⁴ *The groaning she caused* depends on assuming that the MT ‘*anhātâ*’ is to be construed as having a feminine pronominal suffix. The noun, of course, can be taken as an extended feminine form (GKC 90g) simply meaning ‘all groaning’. It is ever the promise of the next government not just to undo the mischief of the last but to make everything perfect.

6–9 Isaiah begins this explanation by testifying to a strong sense of divine revelation: *This is what the LORD says to me* (see on 18:4). *LORD* ('*adōnāy*, 'Sovereign') is a title suitable to the role the Lord is about to play in a final settlement with the world. Vividly Isaiah describes posting *a lookout* (6), giving him a sign to watch for (7), depicting him as patiently faithful in his duty (8) and, when the sign is fulfilled (9a), reporting the news of the fall of Babylon (9b).

6 *And have him report* is (lit.) 'who will tell what he sees', *i.e.* the lookout is a reliable man who will neither fabricate nor falsify.

7 The verse is (lit.) 'When he sees a mounted troop, pairs of horses, a mounted troop on donkeys, a mounted troop on camels ...'. M. S. Seale has pointed out that 'Arabian nomads, preparing to go into battle, rode one mount, whether camel or horse, and trailed another—usually their best mare—which they mounted just before flight.' (*Cf. 2 Ki. 9:25*, which Seale translates, 'You and I were riding pairs').⁵⁵

8 *And the lookout* is (lit.) 'And the lion called'.⁵⁶ (On animal names used as honorifics see 15:9 and footnote.) The force of the words is 'And, lion that he is, he ...', *i.e.* a man of resolute strength, not likely to be intimidated *etc.* was chosen as the lookout and, in the event, proved his mettle (see Gn. 49:9, 14, 17, 21). He persevered 'constantly, daily ... all the nights ...' and in the end the sign was fulfilled. Incidentally, verses 6–8 cast light on the care taken by the prophets in the discharge of their vocation. They had to have intrinsic reliability of character, be men who would tell only what they saw (6) and have a determination to get the right message and to get the message right, to wait for the clue to be given and then listen diligently (7). They needed the discipline to wait for the word with all the intentness of a trusty sentry (8; cf. Je. 42:4, 7; Hab. 2:1). There must be no prevarication, laxity or uncertainty in the reception of what the Lord would say to his people.

9 This verse is (lit.) 'And oh look! Here comes a mounted troop of men, pairs of horses.' Since they are still riding one horse and leading another they must be returning as victors. They are not fleeing on the best mount but bringing news of conquest: *Babylon* and its whole ideology (*its gods*) are shattered. Historically, this refers to the

⁵⁵ Seale, p. 97.

⁵⁶ The NIV *and the lookout* follows Q^a in reading *rō'eh* ('a seeing one') instead of the MT *'aryēh* ('a lion').

obliteration of Babylon by Assyria in 689, but this has now receded into the background and Isaiah is looking forward to the eschatological Babylon and the day of the Lord.

10 Picking up the verb *tell* from the opening section (verse 2a, ‘shown’), Isaiah rounds the poem off. He saw a *dire vision* (1b–2a), and he has now reported it as a message. Therefore, in the oracle’s original setting, let Hezekiah be warned. Merodach-Baladan may be plausible, but to identify with him is to identify with the doomed. The cryptic title (1a) indicates that Isaiah is looking beyond a historical incident to the Babylon which first appeared in Shinar (Gn. 11:1ff.) and encapsulated the spirit of self-sufficiency, the confidence of human beings that they could find security through their own technological expertise. It is *that* Babylon he has in mind as he warns the people of God to maintain their separate identity (*cf.* 52:11). Not that this is easy! They are (lit.) ‘my crushed one, son of my threshing-floor’. It is all too easy, amid the batterings of life, to opt for an apparent escape or relief based on compromise. It is hard to maintain the walk of faith, to believe that when crushed we are still his people, that it is on his floor we are being threshed and that our safety and security consist in remaining, with lion-like obduracy, where we are, in his care who is *the LORD Almighty ... the God of Israel*. While the content of this vision is thus disturbing, its theology is reassuring. The Sovereign God (6) whose power lies behind all history is *the LORD*, Yahweh, *i.e.* he is not only the judge of those who refuse and disobey him but the Redeemer of those whom he chooses—the God of the exodus. He is also *the God of Israel*, *i.e.* not the God whom we have chosen to be our God but the God who chose us and committed himself to our welfare.

b. Silence (Edom): the prolongation of time (21:11–12)

Does this oracle arise from the approach of an individual Edomite to Isaiah for guidance (*cf.* 2 Ki. 8:7ff.) or is it Isaiah’s imaginative response to some crisis (perhaps Sargon’s Arabian campaign of 715) through which Edom was passing? We have no means of knowing but we feel the poignancy of a lone voice crying out of the darkness.

In the wider context, this oracle corresponds to Isaiah’s message to the Philistines, in which the Gentiles misunderstood the times and thought the Davidic dynasty to be defunct. Here, they do not understand the times at all. This comparison fits the development of the pattern of the oracles in chapters 13–27. As history moves forward, greater darkness envelops the world, bringing greater uncertainty—‘Where is every-

thing going?’

In the immediate context, there are many links with the preceding section: the ‘watchman’ (11) links with the watchman of verses 6–9; the voice calling out of the ‘night’ (12) links with the ‘twilight’ and the sense of foreboding in verse 4; the predicted sequence of days and nights (12) matches the days and nights spent by the lookout awaiting the fulfilment of the promised word in verse 8. Thus, what seems totally unhelpful (What can you tell me? I can tell you nothing. Will things change? No, they will not.) contributes to Isaiah’s overall view of history. The threshing and winnowing of the Lord’s people (verse 10) will be protracted. Darkness prevails rather than light and things go on as they always have done (cf. 2 Pet. 3:4), day and night coming from nowhere and going nowhere. This discipline of patient waiting is not, of course, unexpected. Chapters 6–12 revealed a tension between nearness and remoteness. Immanuel is both imminent (9:1 <8:23>) and afar (11:12). This is now part of Isaiah’s astonishing grasp of the way things will eventuate. An unknown Edomite asked if things will change for the better and if the night will lift and light return (11bc), and the prophet replied, ‘Not yet, but give it time!’ (12). Thus, a solitary Gentile experience mirrors world history: the end will come, the end is not yet. Hope lies in the undated future (12ab), and though it is deferred it is sure (12cd).

11 *Dumah* (cf. Gn 25:14) was a son of Ishmael. Kaiser (cf. Kissane) reports a town of this name in Edom and Joshua 15:52 lists a town called Dumah in Judah. The word means ‘silence’ (Pss. 94:17; 115:17). The questioner came from *Seir*, i.e. Edom (Gn. 32:3), and doubtless Isaiah intended *Dumah* both to hint at Edom (*'ed_oum*) and also to reflect the silence of his oracle regarding the future.⁵⁷ The idea of the *watchman* (*šōmēr*, ‘one guarding or keeping’) matches the ‘lookout’ of verse 6, but there the word is *m^eṣappeh* which appropriately depicts one watching for a coming event. Here we have one ‘holding on’ while time passes. Isaiah expresses in his own delicate poetry, *What is left of the night?*, whatever tale of distress was brought to him.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ The LXX’s ‘The Vision of Idumea’ adds nothing to our understanding. Erlandsson (*ad loc.*) notes Akkadian sources which call Edom *udumu*, but he sees the name Dumah as a conscious allusion to the oracle’s content. Cf. Eichrodt.

⁵⁸ The sense of desolation in trouble is enhanced by the ‘tailing off’ of the second line, achieved by using the shorter word for ‘night’ (*šōmēr mā-millay^eâ, šōmēr mah-millēl*) and by using extended

12 God's programme is carried forward not only in great dramatic acts (9) but also in long tracts of time when nothing seems to be happening. Isaiah imposed on his enquirer the bitterest medicine of all, the discipline of sticking it out. *Is coming* is the perfect of certainty meaning 'is sure to come'. *Come back again* (omit *yet*) signifies that though the process be protracted, it does have an end.⁵⁹

c. Desert evening (Arabian tribes): needs but no solutions (21:13–17)

Tema (verse 14) was an oasis city and caravan centre a hundred miles south of Elath and two hundred miles east of the Red Sea. The Dedanites were an Arabian tribe of the same general locality and Kedar (verse 16) was an Arabian tribe which gave its name to the northern extension of the desert. The whole Arabian area was involved in the suffering and unrest of the Assyrian period. It is known that Kedar was paying tribute in 738. In 715 Sargon II campaigned against the tribes between Tema and the Gulf of Aqabah, and in 703 the Arabs joined in rebellion with Merodach-Baladan and were subdued by Sennacherib. There is, therefore, no need to consider a later date for this piece. Even though we cannot pinpoint the situation Isaiah is sketching, his picture is clear. Tema is urged to succour those who flee from war. This is all we need to know—a Gentile world in trouble and providing help within its own borders. In the parallel oracle (15:1–16:14), the Gentile Moab in crisis sought help in Zion only to withdraw, through pride, from the shelter that was available. But would, perhaps, the collective resources of the Gentile world prove sufficient? The ‘interim fulfilment’ of verses 16–17 puts paid to any such hope; within a year all will be over for Kedar. When, therefore, we place this oracle within Isaiah’s schema we learn that history will prove that the world cannot solve its problems. Gentile fugitives may be succoured by Gentiles but their basic problem of security remains unsolved.

The situation (21:13–15)

A¹ A situation of need (13b)

B An attempted solution (14)

A²The situation explained (15)

forms and rhyme in the final line ('im-tib'āyûn b'e'āyû šubû 'ētāyû).

⁵⁹ The verbal forms (*tib'āyûn b^eāyû'ētāyû*) exhibit the retention of the original 'y' of the *lamed/he* verb (GKC, 75u).

13 The translation *An oracle concerning Arabia* fails to note that, uniquely among the titles in this cycle of oracles, the preposition *b^e* ('in', 'against') precedes the second word (*cf.* Zc 9:1) and that this means, not 'Arabia' but 'Arabs' ('*a*rāb; *cf.* Je. 25:24). Why should Isaiah entitle the passage 'in/against Arabs'? The LXX omits the title altogether and for *of Arabia* (*ba*'rāb; the same formation as verse 13) reads 'in the evening' (*bā'*ereb). This, however, points us in the right direction—parallel to our understanding of 'Dumah' in verse 11. Isaiah uses the form allusively, offering no clear meaning but calling attention to the two components of the poem itself: eventide (a tribulation motif) and the Arabian situation. This cannot be called a sure solution, but it suits the cryptic titles characteristic of this cycle and the place of this oracle in the series, Gentiles in a darkening world. The NIV understands *Dedanites* (see introductory paragraph above) as receiving the command (14) to *bring water*, which, as far as it goes, is allowable. In order, however, to provide a parallel command for *Tema* it then emends the perfect tense ('they bring food'; 14) to an imperative. The change is minimal (from *qidd^emû* to *qadd^emû*). If the MT is preserved, the Dedanites are the fugitives who are encouraged to find temporary lodging in the thickets: 'You must stop overnight ...'. *Camp* (✓ *līn*) is never used specifically of camping but always of making an overnight stay. *The thickets* is the scrub-land, off the beaten track, where one might camp for safety's sake. On *of Arabia* see the introductory paragraph above. A possibly better translation might be 'in Arabian-eventide'.

14 For these Dedanite travellers in their insecurity, the people of *Tema* bring food. It is probably best to treat both verbs as perfect tense. The form of the first *bring* (*hētāyû*) can be either imperative (KB, BDB) or perfect (GKC, 76d).⁶⁰ The second verb, which the NIV also translates as *bring*, is certainly perfect and means 'anticipate', get there first, (be there to) meet'. Hence, a literal translation would be, 'To meet the thirsty, the inhabitants of the land of Tema brought water; with his bread [*i.e.* the food he needed] they were there to meet the wanderer.' Thus Isaiah watches a rescue operation in progress. *Fugitives* (✓ *nādad*; found also as *they flee* in verse 15) forms a link with the parallel oracle, the fugitive Moabites in 16:2–3, who fled for refuge to Zion but whose pride stopped them from embracing shelter. The Dedanites are cared for by their own, but they find no security there either (16–17).

⁶⁰ The form *hētāyû* by elision of the initial *aleph*.

15 This verse begins with ‘For’ and is explanatory. The fugitives have been caught up in the actuality of warfare and so took to flight. On *they flee* ($\sqrt{nāqad}$, ‘wander, scatter’) see verse **14**. *From the sword/‘swords’* shows they were caught between opposing forces; the grim situation of those whose land provides the battleground. The battle was joined—*the sword was drawn* and the *bow* was *bent*/‘trodden’, *i.e.* strung for action—and the *heat of battle/‘the weight of war’* drove them from their homes.⁶¹

Interim fulfilment (**21:16–17**)

Beginning with ‘For’, these verses offer an explanation of the preceding oracle. What lies behind the plight of the fugitives is immediately the pressure of war (**15**), but it is ultimately the will of the Sovereign (**16a**) and the controlling word he has spoken (**17c**).

A¹ The sovereign word (**16a**)

- a. Its divine origin
- b. Its human reception

B¹ The imminent end (**16bc**)

- a. The time factor
- b. The end of Kedar’s status (‘glory’)

B² The end of Kedar’s potency (**17ab**)

A² The divine word (**17c**)

- a. The identity of the God who speaks
- b. The perspective from which he speaks

As in the parallel oracle (**15:1–16:14**), here too is an interim fulfilment (see **16:14**), a presently coming event which will act as an immediate assurance of the efficacy of the divine word and, therefore, of the fulfilment of forecasts as yet unrealized. Identities of wording also cement the two oracles together. *kābōd*, meaning ‘glory’, appears as ‘pomp’ here and as ‘splendour’ in **16:14**; both oracles include the phrase ‘as a servant bound by contract’ and both contain the idea of the remnant (*še’ār*), translated by the NIV as ‘survivors’ and ‘few’.

16 *The LORD* ($’adōnāy$) means ‘the Sovereign’ (see **6:1**). *Says* is a perfect tense in

⁶¹ The final three lines of verse **15** have three words each, and each line ends with an emphatic \hat{a} . The effect, like three sharp punches, reflects the shock of battle—and Isaiah’s mastery of language.

Hebrew, used not as reporting a past word but expressing that the Lord's mind is settled. Occasionally Isaiah emphasizes his sense of receiving the divine word (see verse 6). By the use of *to me* he calls attention both to the origin of the word in God and the reality of its human reception, *i.e.* respectively, revelation and inspiration. For *as a servant bound by contract*, see 16:14. *Pomp* means 'glory', *i.e.* everything that Kedar gloried in.

17 *The survivors of the bowmen* is lit 'the remainder of the number of the bow'. This is the only place where 'bow' stands for 'bowmen'. The reason for this reduction of Kedar as a 'power' is that the Lord has so spoken (lit. 'For it is Yahweh, the God of Israel, who has spoken'). This not only expresses the conviction that Israel's God is the only God, but (since this is a word of divine self-affirmation) it also stresses the centrality of his own people in his world management. Gentiles in distress have only human power to look to; Israel has omnipotence on its side.

d. The Valley of Vision (Jerusalem): the unforgivable sin (22:1–25)

Again the people of God occupy the fourth place in the cycle of oracles. As Isaiah probes further forward into history, they are still surrounded by the world (see p. 132). In the first cycle, the prophet's spotlight fell on northern Israel (17:1ff.) and exposed their abandonment of the way of faith for the way of collective security, the Aramean alliance. Here, Judah is under the spotlight and is found abandoning the way of faith for that of self-reliance. Thus, the people of God surrender to the pressure of the surrounding world. For the way of collective security is that of the Gentile tribes (21:13–15), and the way of self-reliance is that of proud Moab (15:1–16:14).

Three oracles are brought together in chapter 22: Jerusalem (verses 1–14); Shebna (verses 15–19); and Eliakim (verses 20–25). They have a common theme in the condemnation of a this-worldly security. Thus, Jerusalem is found cannibalizing itself to make itself safe, without a thought of looking to the Lord (verses 8–11); Shebna is portrayed as the man concerned only for his own worldly glory, before and after death (verses 16–18); and Eliakim is at risk of becoming the focal point of the security of others to his own and their downfall (verses 23–24). When the city (verses 1–14), the man (verses 15–19) and the family (verses 23–24) become self-sufficient they have committed the unpardonable sin.

The self-sufficient city (22:1–14)

The interpretation of this section hinges on the way we understand the Hebrew perfect tenses of verses 3–7 and, derivatively, the Hebrew participles of verse 2b. Because perfects express a *type* of action (what is complete or definite) rather than a *time* of action, the question has to be asked whether the context is better suited by a past action or a future action so certain that it can be expressed as over and done with. Participles, being similarly ‘timeless’, take their time-orientation from their context.

Some make the verses look back to the past,⁶² to a time when Sennacherib (2 Ki. 18:13–19:37) had come and gone and, even though there had been humiliation and loss, the lifting of the threat provoked an outburst of joy, sickening to the prophet. This view has a commendable simplicity, but at the same time it is questionable if this could have been the tone of Isaiah’s ministry following what he knew to have been a signal act of divine deliverance. He might well have discerned an element of hollowness in the national joy, but the evidence of chapter 37 suggests that he would have capitalized on the situation, not so much by underlining the sin of self-sufficiency as by labouring to show how faith had been justified and how reliance on the Lord evaporated the threat. Another, though smaller, objection is that there is no other evidence that rulers evacuated the city under Sennacherib’s pressures (3).

A slightly different view (held e.g. by Skinner and Herbert) looks back to a moment when Sennacherib appeared to accept Hezekiah’s gold and to lift the threat against Jerusalem (2 Ki. 18:16). We do not know what period intervened before Assyria treacherously renewed pressure on Jerusalem (2 Ki. 18:17), but it is easy to believe that

⁶² Commentators propose very elaborate reconstructions of verses 1–14. Clements understands verse 1 as Isaiah’s condemnation of joy following the deliverance from Sennacherib in 701. Verse 4, a deuteronomistic addition, probably laments the fall of the city in 587, and verses 8b–11 reflect a post–587 comment on trusting military defences. Kaiser discerns strata here. Verses 1–4, 12–14 are the Isaianic substrata; verses 7–8b, 11b are the work of ‘the first interpreter’ looking back on the events of 587 in the spirit of Isaiah; verses 9–11a are later in the exile, and verses 5–6, which are later still, are the work of a ‘proto-apocalyptic writer’ making the events of the fall of Jerusalem relevant to his own times and using the past as the model of coming eschatological turmoil. We need to remember that this sort of reconstruction is not based on manuscriptal or other objective evidence but is an interpretative exercise as commentators wrestle with what they perceive to be the inherent problems of the text.

the apparent escape from danger was the occasion of city-wide rejoicing. Against this Isaiah inveighs, asking what there is to rejoice over when people die in siege conditions and deserters are captured without resisting (2b–3). Rather, they should be aware of divine hostility as they see walls battered down (5) and Assyria's allies rampant (6) and aware too that their choice of a militarist, self-sufficient solution (8–11) had put them beyond divine forgiveness (12–14). This solution too is broadly persuasive. The occasion cannot be faulted. At that point, their gold having turned Assyria away, their jollity was nothing Isaiah could approve—glee rather than joy, giving glory to human endeavour and resources. So far so good, but the details are more recalcitrant. First, it is unlikely that Jerusalem was under seige long enough for the full rigour of siege conditions (2b) to have been felt. In fact, was Jerusalem strictly under siege at all during this episode or just under threat? And again, there is no other record of leadership defection such as that described in verse 3. Furthermore, how could the Assyrian forces be represented by *Elam* (6), which throughout this period was Babylon's ally against Assyria?

We must look at the verses again. According to verses 1–4, there is a contrast between people and prophet: they rejoice, but he weeps. This is because he sees what they do not see: death, defection and capture (2b–3), in fact nothing less than (lit.) ‘the destruction of the daughter of my people’ (4). Verse 5 (beginning with ‘For’) adds the further explanation that this is a special ‘day of the Lord’. Are we to believe that such a day had come and gone without the populace noticing it? Is not Isaiah in principle saying, ‘If you could see coming what I see coming, there would be no rejoicing’? Such a forward view makes the reference to *Elam* intelligible. Isaiah has long known that Jerusalem will fall to some foe, though not to Assyria. It was revealed to him at the time of the Babylonian visit (chapter 39) that Babylon would be the destroyer. This truth is here veiled by referring to Babylon’s remoter ally, Elam, and to the unidentifiable Kir in verse 6 (see below). Consequently, the perfect tenses of verses 3–7 must be prophetic perfects, the certainty of the already-decided acts of God. The passage then looks like this:

A¹ Questionable joy (1–2a)

B¹ Coming calamity (2b–4)

C Explanation: the day the Lord has ready (5–7)

B² Past choices (8–11)

A² Culpable joy (12–14)

The movement of thought is from present joy (1–2a) to coming sorrows (2b–7) and then from past actions (8–11) to present joy and its consequences (12–14). The message of the whole is solemn, that past decisions mould future experiences (B², B¹), and the unforgivable sin is to believe that if one cannot save oneself one cannot be saved (9–11) and to act as though this world were all (13). The one situation which matches this oracle is that Jerusalem was *en fête* to celebrate the inauguration of Hezekiah's tunnel. This was to them the crowning guarantee of a self-wrought security and to Isaiah, the unforgivable sin. There is, of course, no other evidence of such a festival day, but the decidedly understated way in which 2 Kings 20:20 and 2 Chronicles 32:30 allude to what was in fact an engineering marvel suggests that they would not have wished to record such a day and that they too concurred with Isaiah's attitude.

This shows the overall shape and thrust of the oracle, but since its unity has been sharply questioned (see p. 180, n. 1), it is necessary to probe its integrity a little further. Internal markers separate off verses 1–7 and 8–14 (respectively, A¹ and C and B² and A²). In verse 2 thoughtless joy makes the city *full* ($\sqrt{mālē}$) of revelry; in verse 7 the surrounding valleys are *full* of hostile chariotry. Verse 8 refers to the ‘uncovering’ ($\sqrt{gālā}$) of Judah by the Lord and verse 14 to the Lord’s ‘uncovering’ ($\sqrt{gālā}$) of Isaiah’s ear in revelation. Both sections begin with the city ($\textit{îr}$; 2, 9) and end with implied death (7, 14). References to unreal joy (2, 13) act as an inclusio to the whole poem and the title *the Lord, the LORD Almighty* is common to both sections (5, 12, 14).

Questionable joy and coming calamity (22:1–4)

1 Verse 5 shows that *the Valley of Vision* refers to Jerusalem, but Isaiah does not explain why he chose this enigmatic title for the city. It is hardly simply because he lived there and the city was, therefore, perforce the home-base for all his visions. Verse 14 indicates a particularly vivid experience of divine revelation on this occasion, and presumably the title arose from some circumstance connected with it. It is best to think of *Valley* as metaphorical of life’s darker experiences (cf. Ps. 23:4). Isaiah endured a ‘dark night of the soul’ as he contemplated the inevitable judgment that would come on his city. *What troubles you* is a strange translation since obviously the people were carefree! It means (lit.) ‘What to you, then?’. ‘You’ is singular feminine, i.e. the city personified, and ‘then’ is logical, not temporal. The form ‘What to you?’ is a formula of repudiation (cf. Je. 2:18;

Ho. 14:8 ⟨9⟩) meaning ‘What business have you ...?’ or ‘What do you mean by ...?’, implying that nothing can justify this course of action (see **52:5**). In **15:3** the *roofs/housetops* were the places of communal lament; here they are the places of communal joy.

2–3 *Commotion* (*t^ešu'ôt*) is used in **Job 36:29** for the rumble of thunder and in **Job 39:7** for the ‘hub-bub’ of town life. In **Zechariah 4:7**, as here, it refers to the noise of an excited crowd. *Tumult* (*√ hāmâ*) is used of happy excitement (cf. **1 Ki 1:40–41**, where it is translated ‘noise’). According to verse **7**, *your slain* died as a result of siege, but here the cause is not commented on, it is simply left that the end of the matter will be death. *All leaders have fled* is from *√ nādad*, which means ‘to flee’ in the sense of ‘scattering’ this way and that. Isaiah is not recording the past but envisaging the future as if it were before his very eyes. The fulfilment came in **2 Kings 25:4**. *Without using the bow/[away] from the bow* means without a shot being fired either in defence or by the enemy. When the end came there was none of the elated confidence Isaiah saw in the contemporary city. There was neither resolution to stand nor courage to fight. The same verb (*√'āsar*, ‘to bind’) is used twice for *captured* and *taken prisoner*. This repetition underlines the idea that even flight was useless. The NIV’s interpretive addition, *having fled while the enemy was still far away/they fled [√ bārāh]* far away’ is needless.

4 *Therefore*, i.e. consequent on this vision of the end, the people’s busy plans for life (**9–11**) ended in death and being deserted by those they trusted (**3**). Those who survived were destined only for captivity (**3**). They had planned for a siege (**9–11**) instead of trusting the Lord and a siege they got in full and plenty! *Turn away* is (lit.) ‘look away’ (*√ ša'â*; cf. **17:7**). Isaiah wants neither the curiosity (**4a**) nor the sympathy (**4b**) of people who are so plainly out of touch with what he feels and sees. *Do not try* is (lit.) ‘do not hasten’ or ‘do not rush’. *Of my people/‘of the daughter of my people’* is a synonym for Jerusalem as the Lord’s daughter (cf. **Je. 8:19**). It is found only here in Isaiah. The description is full of emotion over the city like a beloved daughter, helpless and at the mercy of the merciless.

Explanation: the day the Lord has ready (22:5–7)

It is typical of Isaiah to add a second explanation (verse **5** begins with ‘For’).⁶³ His

⁶³ The ‘double explanation’ is characteristic of Isaiah in the form—since x has happened, therefore

weeping (4) looks back (through the initial *Therefore* to its first explanation in verses 2b–3) to the scene of death, desertion and captivity. But now there is a deeper explanation: behind the catastrophe lies the hand of God. It is a day of the Lord, expressed in *tumult* (5), implemented by *Elam* (6) and totally inescapable (7).

5 On *has a day* cf. 2:11–12 where the wording is identical. *Tumult* (*m^ehûmâ*, $\sqrt{hāmā}$; cf. verse 2) describes the noise of the day, *trampling* (*m^ebûsâ*, ‘a treading under foot’) the violence of it and terror (*m^ebûkâ*) the consequent disorientation of those under attack. (*m^ebûkâ* is found elsewhere only in Mi. 7:4, but cf. $\sqrt{bûk}$, ‘to be confused’, ‘to wander confusedly’ (‘to crush or break in pieces’). It is likely that Isaiah sought (or coined) an unusual word in order to achieve the assonance *m^eqarqar qir*.⁶⁴ The noun *crying* does not occur elsewhere in the form *šoa'*, but cf. *šûa'* in Job 30:24; 36:19 and $\sqrt{šāwa'}$ (‘to cry out for help’). Isaiah envisages screams for help resounding to the encircling *mountains* from the sack of the city.

6 *Elam* lay to the east of Babylon and was throughout Isaiah’s period an independent power allied to Babylon against Assyria. The verbs *takes up* and *uncovers* continue in the prophetic perfect tense (see introductory note and verse 3) with the sense ‘is certain to ...’, ‘will most certainly ...’. The Hebrew of verse 6 is very rhythmical, being three lines of three words each. It has a drum-beat, marching effect, matching its content. Weapons of war—*quiver* then *charioteers and horses* (lit. ‘chariotry’/cavalry, men, horses’) and *shield*—are amassed. These are weapons of attack (*quiver*) and of defence (*shield*), and in between are the means of mobile warfare. The location of *Kir* is unknown (cf. Am. 1:5; 9:7; it is not the Kir in Moab of Is. 15:1).

7 The fact that *Your choicest valleys are full of chariots* and *horsemen are posted at the city gates*/‘And they have carefully positioned horsemen right up to the gate’ describes the occupation and spoliation of the countryside and the threat to the security of the city. (On *gates* see 28:6.) *Full* forms an inclusio with the ‘full’ in verse 2a. Notice the movement from preparation for war (6) to implementation (7) and the impression of the enemy sweeping unopposed through the countryside to the city.

y follows for/because z has happened, where x and z are parallel explanations of y (see 15:4–5, 7–8; 16:9; 25:3).

⁶⁴ *qarqar* would be a pilpel of $\sqrt{qûr}$. Cf. *tiltēl* from $\sqrt{tûl}$ in verse 17. See GKC, 72m.

Past choices (22:8–11)

These verses are held together by an inclusio involving the two verbs, *looked* ($\sqrt{nābat}$) and *saw* ($rā'â$), in verses 8–9 and verse 11 (where the second verb is translated *have regard*). In form the verses are a poem in their own right:

A¹ The Lord: divine action exposing Judah to danger (8a)

B Human response: self-reliance (8b–11a)

a¹ Defences (weapons, walls appraised) (8b–9a)

b¹ Water supply (9b)

a² Defences (walls repaired) (10)

b² Water supply (11a)

A² The Lord: unsought and unrecognized (11b)

Note how cleverly Isaiah underlines the element of reliance on human resource and endeavour by alternating his references to defences and water supply, giving the impression of a hive of activity as people dart hither and yon, intent on making themselves secure.

8 *The defences of Judah are stripped away* should be translated, ‘When he removed Judah’s protective covering’. The NIV is linguistically permissible but contextually inappropriate. The Lord is always the ultimate agent in his people’s experiences, and it suited his purposes at this juncture to test, by the onset of Sennacherib, whether they, under Hezekiah’s favourable leadership, would walk in the way of faith or the way of the world (cf. Dt. 8:2–5). This comes out well in the Chronicles perspective (2 Ch. 32:1). *Defences* (*māsāk*) is used in Psalm 105:39 of the ‘covering’ of the Lord’s cloud and in Isaiah 30:1 of the ‘protection’ (NIV ‘alliance’) sought in Egypt. Note the sense of immediate reaction in *You looked in that day*. No time was needed for thought; at once self-sufficiency and self-competence took over. Their primary trust was militarism: their stored armaments (8b), their material defences (9a) and their supplies (9b). *The Palace/‘house’ of the Forest* (cf. 1 Ki. 7:2–12) was possibly originally a royal treasury (1 Ki. 10:14–17).

9–11a Kidner notes the activism of these verses and the escapism of verses 12–13, the former a denial of faith and the latter of repentance. The details of Jerusalem’s water supply are unclear.⁶⁵ The source was the Gihon Spring, east of the city. In Jebusite days this was linked to a shaft within the city (2 Sa. 5:6–8), but at a later date there was an

overground conduit (7:3) supplying what is here called *the Old Pool*. This conduit may have been Solomonic (cf. Ec. 2:6) and suited to times of peace, but it was a matter of panic to the unbelieving Ahaz (7:3ff.). Hezekiah, alarmed by this vulnerability of Jerusalem, engineered his tunnel (2 Ki. 20:20; 2 Ch. 32:2–4). The Gihon Spring was now concealed and Jerusalem made secure in its water supply. The *reservoir* is probably the pool fed by the tunnel and may be the same as *the Lower Pool* (9). Hezekiah was a wall-builder, adding considerably to the fortifications of Jerusalem. The reference in verse 11 to *the two walls* may be to an area between a new wall and an existing wall of the old City of David. The point, however, is to indicate that now for the first time the city had a protected water supply. The other side of Jerusalem's 'do-it-yourself' salvation was walled strength. Hence, verse 10 refers to an inventory of expendable buildings. Even to this length will self-sufficiency go, becoming *en route* a parable of its own intrinsically destructive nature. Psalm 48:12 <13> uses the same verb (*sāpar*) of the glad acknowledgment of the perfectly unscarred city when the Lord delivered it from the kings of the earth. It is, however, one thing to profess faith liturgically and another exercise it practically in a crisis. One of the people's greatest achievements (the tunnel) and some of their most costly sacrifices (the lost buildings) become their unforgivable sin (14), because they are manifestations of self-sufficiency and human omnicompetence.

11b *Not look ... or have regard* are the negative counterparts of the *looked ... saw* of verses 8–9 (see outline above). The Lord was not in their purview. Why bother with faith when you have walls, water and weapons? Why look to God when you can look to your own resources? The Lord, however, is the agent in general (he *made it*), and in detail (he *planned it*/‘fashioned it [as a potter]’). This refers first to the situation in which Jerusalem then found itself. The circumstances of the Lord's people are not chance but design, and their resource is not to change their circumstances (challenging his will) or question them (doubting his will) but to throw themselves in faith upon the doer, the potter himself. Secondly and more particularly, *it* is Jerusalem itself, the city chosen by the Lord to make his name dwell there (Dt 12:5; 1 Ki. 8:29). When he chose it he knew all about its vulnerable water supply. It was no accident or oversight; the potter made it so

⁶⁵ See H. Shanks, *The City of David* (Tel Aviv, Bialik Institute-Dvir., 1973), p. 72; M. Burrows, 'Jerusalem' (IDB), p. 851a.

on his wheel. He did not leave his city short of water; Hezekiah did not improve the supply, he only redirected it. But the Lord arranged the supply in such a way that living in Jerusalem was a perpetual exercise of faith, a perpetual challenge to find security in the Lord—and Hezekiah's tunnel contradicted the way of faith.

Culpable joy (22:12–14)

a¹ Divine word: *The Lord, the LORD Almighty* calls for repentance (12)

b¹ Human contradiction (13)

b² Human reception, the uncovered ear (14a)

a² Divine word: *The Lord, the LORD Almighty* refuses forgiveness (14b)

12 *The Lord, the LORD Almighty* is sovereign in status (*the Lord, 'ādōnāy*), saving by nature (*the LORD, Yahweh, the exodus God*) and omnipotent in every situation (*Almighty, 'of hosts'*). How foolish to look to weapons etc. and not to him! *On that day* is a deliberate contrast with the same words in verse 8; what they did and what the Lord wanted. The way to look to him was in a true repentance and contrition (*Joel 2:12ff.*) which also touched and changed the outer life. *On to tear out your hair* see *Jeremiah 47:5; Amos 8:10*; and on *sackcloth* see *Genesis 37:34*.

13 Isaiah returns to the theme of verse 2. But now we see why he found their *joy* so offensive: they were contradicting the mind of God (12) and applauding human works (8–11). With *for tomorrow we die*, Isaiah is not reporting their words but verbalizing their attitudes (*cf. 28:14–15*). In the crisis which was upon them their sole determination was to have all that this world could offer them before it was snatched away from them. This ‘mind-set’ denies the spiritual dimension, for their behaviour proclaimed that if their own endeavours (their weapons [8], costly defences [10], and engineering marvels [11]) could not save them, nothing could.

14 This verse begins (lit.) ‘and the Lord of hosts has revealed/uncovered himself in my ears’. The verb $\sqrt{gālā}$ (here a reflexive niphil) forms an inclusio with verse 8, marking out the second section of the oracle. The form of words here stresses the objectivity of revelation as something coming to the prophet from outside; its authenticity as a revealing of the Lord himself; and the genuine reception by a human being of the very word of God (*cf. 5:9; 50: 4–5*). *Till your dying day/till you die*’ uses the oath formula (*'im*), requiring ‘Certainly/I swear that ...’. On *sin* (*'āwôn, ‘iniquity’*) *atoned for* ($\sqrt{kāp̄ar}$) see 6:7. Where there is no ‘*Woe to me!*’ (6:5; *cf. verse 12*) there is no seraph

sent on a mercy flight. The sin of unbelief—here expressed in ignoring the Lord (11b) and confident self-reliance (8–11a)—is the unforgivable sin. The whole passage is a set piece on the contrast between salvation by faith and salvation by works.

A study in trust (22:15–25)

It may seem a mighty come-down from the high matters of state to the concerns of individuals, but the oracles on Shebna and Eliakim (the only oracles on individuals in chapters 13–27) serve two purposes. First, they show that the choice between faith and works is individual as well as national and that divine judgment reaches to the individual level, and secondly, they provide one of Isaiah's interim fulfilments. If the two men are those mentioned in 36:3, 11, 22; 37:2, people had not long to wait before seeing the beginning of the demotion of Shebna and the certainty of the word of the Lord.

Shebna found his identity as a person in the ‘this-worldly’ benefits of his office, and he set about securing his ‘place in history’ by his own efforts. He enjoyed a position as the king’s right hand man *in charge of the palace* (15). He went in for ostentatious display (*splendid chariots*; 18) and he intended to perpetuate his memory in a grandiose tomb (16). He was, therefore, individually what the nation was collectively: wedded to present satisfactions and self-confident in the face of the future. Thus, Isaiah holds up a mirror to his contemporaries.

Eliakim, in contrast, ran the risk of becoming the one whom others trust (see below on verses 23b–25) and in this exposes another alternative to the way of true faith. The reliable office-holder attracts to himself the respect and confidence of people, but should this become a reliance on a human person replacing reliance on the Lord, the end is calamity (25)—both for the person who is thus foolishly trusted and for those who find their security in him or her. Thus human beings are neither self-sufficient (Shebna) nor sufficient for others (Eliakim). In each case there is a fatal usurpation of the place due only to the Lord. Isaiah reiterates the message of 2:22, ‘Stop trusting in man’.

The literary form of this package has attracted involved theorizing,⁶⁶ and

⁶⁶ Kaiser believes verses 15–18 owe their form to Isaiah, helped by a ‘historicizing redactor’ who wished to expose a contemporary, ‘perhaps a Jewish tax official working on behalf of the

understandably so when we consider that command (15) yields to expostulation (16ab) and to third person comment (16cd). Verses 17–18 describe what the Lord will do to *you* (singular masculine); verses 19–23a have the subject in first person singular and the object moving from second person singular (19) to third person singular (20–23a); and verses 23b–25 are narrative description. But possibly this gives an over-complicated view of the passage. At most it consists of four items.

- a. Verses 15–16 may be a private word to Isaiah, indicating the thrust of his message to Shebna (16ab) and the ground of the Lord's feeling against him (16cd). This would accommodate the switch to the third person in verse 16cd. But on the whole it is better to make 16ab the beginning of the Lord's word to Shebna, with 16cd a third person vocative (see below). This preserves the text without the NIV emendation, which lacks manuscript authority.
- b. Verses 17–18 pronounce the Lord's judgment on Shebna.
- c. Verses 19–23a are couched in the first person: the Lord states what he will do to Shebna (19) and to Eliakim (20–23a).
- d. Verses 23b–24 describe a situation in which Eliakim may become involved.

The only problem is thus the (to us) unexpected switch from third person (16–18) to first person (19–23a). We have already noted how accurately the substance of the Shebna and Eliakim oracles fit with the message of verses 1–14. In addition, the whole passage is linked with the foregoing context by the virtual identity of the questions in verses 1 and 16 and also by the divine title in verses 5, 12, 14–15 (cf. verse 25). We are dealing, therefore, with blocks of Isaiah's ministry belonging to the same period, coherent in theme, and enjoying editorial unification in this complex of oracles. The NIV is probably correct in seeing a change from poetic to prose form at verse 20. Simplicity, therefore, suggests that verse 19 is an editorial bridging verse, summarizing what has preceded and making the switch to first person in preparation for verses 20–23. This is typical of the sort of mosaic Isaiah creates out of his available oracles. Internally, verses 15–25 are bracketed by *what the Lord, the LORD Almighty says* (15) and '*declares the LORD Almighty ... The LORD has spoken*' (25). The fall of Shebna as *you disgrace to your master's house!* (18) is balanced by the danger to Eliakim of becoming *honour for the house of his father* (23). The Eliakim oracle is bracketed by the inclusio *In that day* (20, 25).

Ptolemies'. Kissane, however, is firmly Isaianic.

In content, the passage can be viewed as follows:

- A¹ The Lord's opposition to Shebna (15–16)
 - B¹ The Lord's purposes for Shebna (17–19)
 - B² The Lord's purposes for Eliakim (20–23a)
- A² The Lord's warning regarding Eliakim (23b–25)

Shebna the self-reliant (22:15–19)

15 The word *steward* (*sōkēn*) appears elsewhere only in the feminine: it is used of David's nurse/concubine in 1 Kings 1:2–4. Is it designedly derogatory—‘this lackey’—exposing a fawning, ‘anything to please’ attitude whereby Shebna had achieved promotion? For *in charge of the palace/over the house* cf. 1 Kings 4:6 and 2 Chronicles 26:21, where it is used of Jothan when he was acting as Regent. This indicates the importance of the office.

16 The question is identical with verse 1 except that *'ēpō'* ('then') is now *pōh* ('here'). The idiom remains derogatory: ‘What business have you here?’ The first interrogative (*mā*) questions Shebna’s personal right, the second (*mī*) implicitly denies him a position by reason of family name.⁶⁷ The NIV emends the MT ‘his grave’ to ‘your grave’ without manuscriptal ground. Hebrew frequently follows a vocative with a third person statement (GKC, 144p; cf. 48:1; 54:1). So here, the literal translation, ‘one hewing his grave ...!’, has the force in context of ‘that you should arrogate to yourself the right to be one who ...’. His tomb-making aimed at permanence (*hewing, rock*), prominence (*on the height*) and self-perpetuation (*your resting place/a dwelling for himself*). There is no need to look further for a ground of divine displeasure. Erlandsson suggests Shebna’s actual sin was promoting insurrection against Assyria, but it is precisely his self-sufficiency and pompous self-importance that integrates this passage topically with verses 1–15.

17–18 These verses begin with (lit.) ‘Look, the Lord is going to throw you far away, big man—taking you in his grip, rolling you up really tight—like a ball into a limitless land.’⁶⁸ *Mighty man* (*geber*) is used very generally for ‘person’ or ‘individual’ (Nu. 24:3,

⁶⁷ On these interrogatives, see J. A. Motyer, *The Revelation of the Divine Name* (Tyndale Press, 1959), pp. 17ff.

⁶⁸ The NEB’s ‘shake you as a garment is shaken out to rid it of lice’ (a sentiment no inappropriate to

[15](#)), but it comes from $\sqrt{gābar}$ meaning ‘to be strong’ and probably here retains some of that force as a sarcasm. *Large* is (lit.) ‘broad on both hands’ and hence ‘wide’ or ‘limitless’. Presumably, Shebna was removed to Assyria in one of Sennacherib’s forays, but this is not recorded. Shebna’s self-glorification, epitomized by his *splendid chariots*/‘the chariots of your glory’, brought no security (*cf.* [3:14](#)). Isaiah felt it to be demeaning to the royal house to be served by such a man and calls him *you disgrace to your master’s house*.

[19](#) The two verbs *depose* and *ousted* are respectively ‘to drive out’ ($\sqrt{hāda\bar{p}}$; *e.g.* [Dt. 6:19](#)) and ‘to tear down’ ($\sqrt{hāras}$; *e.g.* [1 Ki. 19:10](#), [14](#)). The second is third person indefinite, ‘one will ...’ and is rightly reflected in the NIV as passive.

Eliakim the trusted ([22:20–25](#))

[21](#) The Lord’s purposes for Eliakim are summed up by the insignia (*robe, sash*) he is given, the *authority* that is handed over to him and the function (*to be a father* is ‘to care for’) with which he is entrusted.

[22–23a](#) Eliakim is given the *key*, *i.e.* the authority to legislate and make binding decisions; his purpose is to be a *peg*, to hold the kingdom firm. The image of the *key* is found only here in the Old Testament (*cf.* [Rev. 3:7](#)). *Peg* (*yātēd*) means ‘tent peg’ unless the context dictates otherwise (*cf.* [Jdg. 16:14](#); [Zc. 10:4](#)) and the picture is of a tent peg driven *into a firm place*, holding the tent secure in the wind. This gives force to the altered meaning in verse [25](#) where Eliakim turns into a ‘wall peg’, a maintenance system for his family. At this point he has departed from his terms of reference.

[23b–25](#) Rather than find here a prediction of the failure of Eliakim, it is equally idiomatic to introduce a hypothetical sentence: ‘Should he, however, become ... and they hang upon him ... in that day ... the peg will give way ...’. In the corrupting tendency of power, the moment will come when Eliakim may yield to the adulation of those who would find their well-being in him and become to them the centre of glory, appeal and supply. The point is not just that leadership changes to pride of position, national good is subverted by domestic interest, public good replaced by concern for a proliferating crowd of ‘hangers-on’—true though that is—but that the trust which

a crawler like Shebna!) is arrived at by altering *geber* (*mighty man*) to *beḡed* (*garment*) and understanding $\sqrt{‘āṭâ}$ to mean ‘to delouse’ (*cf.* [Je. 43:12](#)).

should be reposed in the Lord is transferred to a human being. Just as an individual is not sufficient for himself (Shebna) neither is he sufficient for others (Eliakim).

23 *Seat of honour* is (lit.) ‘throne of glory’.

24 *Offspring and offshoots*/ ‘shoots and side-shoots’ is an idiom of totality. On *bowls* cf. Exodus 24:6 and Song of Songs 7:2 <3>. The *jars* would be bottles or earthenware jars (1 Sa. 1:24; La. 4:2).

25 The collapse comes by a combination of internal weakness (*give way*) and external action (*be sheared off*), for one-one is sufficient to be ‘the trusted one’ nor will the Lord allow it. The strong title, *the LORD Almighty*, exposes the folly of trusting a human being when the Lord is there to be trusted. The strength of the divine commitment to this truth is further enhanced by the concluding statement which is (lit.) ‘for it is the LORD who has spoken’.

e. Tyre: pride and holiness (23:1–18)

‘The world in the shadows’ has proved to be an apt title for this cycle of oracles. The ‘twilight’ of Babylon (21:4), the lone voice out of Edom’s darkness (21:11ff.), troubled Gentile tribes lodging overnight (21:13ff.), the spiritual darkness of Jerusalem’s unforgivable sin (22:14) and now, wailing over fallen Tyre (23:1, 14). Yet there have been flickers of light too. The news of Babylon was brought, as if for comfort, to crushed Israel (21:10), the voice out of Seir was invited to return because day was bound to come (21:11ff.) and now, a great surprise, the merchandise of Tyre will yet become ‘holiness to the Lord’ (23:18).

David and Solomon enjoyed warm relations with Tyre, marred only by Tyrian discontent over the cities Solomon ceded (1 Ki. 9:10ff.). Hiram of Tyre ‘always loved David’ (1 Ki. 5:1) and renewed his covenant with Solomon (1 Ki. 5:12), co-operating commercially over the temple (1 Ki. 5:6ff.). But there was another side. Solomon took Phoenician wives and imported the cult of the Sidonian Ashtoreth (1 Ki. 11:1, 5). These high places remained (2 Ki. 23:13) and Isaiah would have grown up with an awareness of Tyre’s corruption of Israel’s most favoured king. Phoenician influence was an evil genius to the northern kingdom also, even to the extent of almost replacing Yahweh with the Baal of Sidon (1 Ki. 16, 18). In the Psalms, however, though we find Tyre in a hostile coalition against Israel (Ps. 83:7), yet the psalmist prays that the Gentile nations may come to know the name of the Lord (Ps. 83:18). In Psalm 45 the ‘daughter of Tyre’

brings a gift to the royal wedding (verse 12 <13>) and in Psalm 87 Tyre is accorded birthright honours in Zion (verse 4). Finally, in the prophets references are for the most part hostile (Je. 47:4; Am. 1:9ff.; Joel 3:4 <4:4>; Zc. 9:2–4), and it is of Tyre alone that Ezekiel fails to say that they will yet ‘know the Lord’ (Ezk. 25:7, 11; 30:26). Isaiah, however, looks forward to the dedication of Tyre’s wealth to the Lord and his people (23:18), and he is thus living within the traditions to which he was heir, and indeed reaching back to the normative times of David.

While the first cycle of oracles (chapters 13–20) placed the people of God amid the political upheavals of the world, the emphasis in the second cycle has been religious: the fall of the idols of Babylon (21:9) and the unforgivable sin (22:14). Suitably therefore, at the end we come to Tyre, the religious corrupter. But just as Egypt, the political oppressor, will yet come into a co-equal status in the Lord (19:25), so Tyre will yet come into a relationship of holiness. What Tyre gave of old for the temple was on a commercial basis (1 Ki. 5:6ff.), but the Old Testament nourished the hope of something better. Women of Tyre seduced Solomon, but the daughter of Tyre would yet come to the wedding of the king. Isaiah puts the matter in a nutshell: the corrupter will bring holy merchandise. The care a Phoenician widow once extended to a prophet (1 Ki. 17:8–16) will be the norm of coming relationships.

The oracle on Tyre consists of a poem on Tyre’s fall (verses 1–14) and an appendix predicting Tyre’s revival and ultimate allegiance to the Lord and his people (verses 15–18).

Lament for Tyre (23:1–14)

A¹ The lament of the ships of Tarshish: the port destroyed (1)

B The downfall of Tyre and Sidon (2–7)

B¹ Tyre. Silence: contrasting with the former busy international port (2–3)

B² Sidon. Disappointed hopes: the past is as though it had never been (4–5)

B³ Tyre. Evacuation: lament over the past (6–7)

C Agencies, ultimate and proximate (8–13)

C¹ Tyre. The Lord’s plan (8–9)

C² Sidon. The Lord’s command (10–12b)

C³ Tyre. The Lord’s agent (12c–13)

A² The lament of the ships of Tarshish: their fortress destroyed (14)

The divisions of the poem are marked off initially by their opening imperatives (verses 1, 2, 4, 6, 10, 12c) and by the question at verse 8. The A sections are linked by the call to the *ships of Tarshish* and the verb *destroyed* ($\sqrt{\text{šādad}}$); B¹ and C¹ both address Tyre and touch on its trade (*merchants* and *market-place*, $\sqrt{\text{sāhar}}$); B² and C² form a contrast regarding the past (verse 4) and future (verse 12ab) of Sidon; B³ and C³ share the theme of evacuation expressed in the verb *cross over* ($\sqrt{\text{'ābar}}$). Egypt is mentioned by name or in principle three times (verses 3, 5, 10), further establishing the link with the corresponding oracle in the first cycle (19:1–20:6). Egypt is the power that would have destroyed the life of Israel and Tyre the power that corrupted its spiritual life.

1 This is the only oracle in the cycle contained in chapters 13–27 which has a direct rather than a cryptic title. The question must be asked why this is, for in a section so carefully crafted it cannot be accidental. At the same time, Isaiah himself offers no explanation. The occurrence of ‘Moab’ in 25:10 is another case in point. A probable explanation is that Isaiah wished to earth his predictions. In chapters 21–23, and even more in chapters 24–27, his gaze is probing farther and farther into the mists of the future and he may have wanted to maintain the awareness that eschatology happens to ‘real people’. The proved strength of Tyre made it a good test of the sovereignty of the Lord over history; its transformation, in the light of experience, made it a startling example of the sovereignty of mercy. The *ships of Tarshish* were the largest class of merchantmen in ancient fleets. Without Tyre, so much of their trade would be lost. Most references to *Tarshish* would be satisfied by the traditional identification with Tartessos in Spain,⁶⁹ but if 2 Chronicles 20:36–37 means ‘to go to Tarshish’ then a site on the Red Sea or in Africa is required. In any case ‘ship of Tarshish’ came to mean a ship capable of the longest voyages (see also 2:16). Imaginatively, Isaiah thinks of the fleet (lit.) ‘out from Cyprus’ or ‘off Cyprus’ making for Tyre only to be met with a message that ‘it’ (Tyre is an NIV addition) was no more! No name is necessary. City (*house*) and *harbour* alike are gone.

2 *Be silent* ($\sqrt{\text{dāmam}}$) has both senses of ‘still’, i.e. motionless and silent. This beginning of the stanza contrasts with the following impression of a bustling international port. *Island* (i ; cf. 11:11; 20:6) is here the city and island of Tyre and is referred to as (lit.) ‘you whom the merchants of Sidon, the travellers by sea, filled’.

⁶⁹ See J. A. Thompson, ‘Tarshish’, *IBD*, p. 1517.

3 Grammatically, this is a third person vocative (see on 22:16cd); (lit.) ‘[you are] she whose revenue, in great waters, was ...’. *Shihor* is a synonym for the Nile (Jos. 13:3; 1 Ch. 13:5; Je. 2:18). Egypt was proverbially fertile and was the granary of the ancient world. *Market-place* (*sahar*; see verse 18; 45:14; Pr. 3:14; 31:18) more exactly means ‘gain’ and refers to profit from trade. Tyre was a source of international revenue.

4 The silence of the busy port, described in the previous verse, is matched by the sense of blighted, disappointed hopes which prevails. *Ashamed* goes beyond the feeling of embarrassment to the more public idea of ‘reaping shame’, of expectation coming to nothing and of becoming an object of derision. Once more Isaiah’s rich imagination takes over and he hears the sea mourning its loss. This verse has been the subject of much needless alteration of the MT, including the NIV. A literal translation would be, ‘for the sea has spoken, the stronghold of the sea, saying ...’. We may imagine that the people often spoke of the sea as their strength, ‘a moat defensive to a house’, the ever-open door of supply should they be besieged on land, the constant source of their wealth. But now the sea can only grimly recount the loss of its children. *Fortress of the sea* is an appositional genitive, ‘the stronghold, [namely] the sea’. The phrase *I have neither* ... is (lit.) ‘I am as though I had never ...’ (cf. 1:2). This is the first hint that Tyre has fallen to military attack with boundless losses.

5 This verse begins (lit.) ‘When news comes to Egypt, they will writhe in pain like news of Tyre’, meaning ‘When the news comes to Egypt they will writhe in pain as when the news came to Tyre’. The sea is still speaking, envisaging how Egypt will be equally distraught as Tyre itself. The reference is intended to create the impression of the magnitude of the disaster.

6–7 The silence of the shattered city (2–3) gave way to grief over loss of life (4–5) and now to evacuation of refugees, heading (as so often for profit but now in loss) for *Tarshish*. A fine image of reversal of fortune! *Your city of revelry, the old, old city* is (lit.) ‘Your exultant one, whose antiquity is from the days of antiquity’. There was an immense vitality in Tyre which made it expand from a small base to become a power of world significance, but never with imperialist ambitions, never with the intention to settle in far-off lands. It was trade, not conquest, which drove Tyrians; not lordship, but money. The parallel Egypt oracle (19:1–20:6) represents the power of the world pressing on the people of God. Tyre represents the ways of the world exerting their influence.

8–9 The topic changes from what happened (2–7) to why it happened (8–13), and first of all to the mind behind the change in Tyre’s fortunes: the Lord’s plan. When Tyre founded colonies they were ruled by kings Tyre appointed, hence the city could be called *the bestower of crowns*. Not only so, but *princes* and ‘honoured ones of the earth’ were in Tyre’s service. The thought is not of Tyre’s possible temptation to pride, but that with all this array of worldly greatness, Tyre is at last faced with the ‘Disposer Supreme’—*the LORD Almighty*. Why he so planned, we are not told, he is ‘the Judge of all the earth’ and he does right (Gn. 18:25). He decrees to ‘demean the pride of every beauty, to treat with contempt all the honoured of the earth.’

10–12b Verse 10 should be translated, ‘Traverse your land like the Nile, Daughter of Tarshish; no longer is there restraint.’ Tarshish can move without restraint through her own land as the Nile through Egypt since the power of Tyre has been broken. The NIV understands the word *mēzah* as *harbour* but, if it has anything to do with shipping, it is ‘ship-building’ not anchorage (see KB). The word is found in Job 12:21 and Psalm 109:19 as ‘belt’ and here it is used metaphorically of Tyre’s hold over Tarshish.⁷⁰ The explanation of this new-found liberty is that *the LORD has stretched out his hand* —an action sufficient to reduce the world to trembling—and, in particular, he has *given an order* (lit.) ‘concerning Canaan, to destroy her fortresses’⁷¹ and to bring Sidon’s joy to a final end. *Stretched out* is an Egyptian allusion; cf. Exodus 14:16; 15:4–6, 12. ‘Canaan’ is used of Phoenicia in Joshua 5:1. Verse 12 is a fourfold edict against Sidon. The first three consequences are loss of joy (the end of *revelling*, √‘ālēz as in verse 7), loss of peace (*crushed*, √‘āšaq, ‘to oppress, wrong, extort’ and experience violation as of a *virgin* raped) and loss of tenure (they will be exiled and have to *cross over to Cyprus*).

12c–13 The fourth consequence is loss of rest (the unending experience of a displaced

⁷⁰ According to Dhorme, ‘In Assyrian *mezah* is a synonym of *mesirru* (√‘āsar) meaning “belt”, “strap”.’ In verse 10, Q^a reads ‘*ibdiy* (“serve”) instead of ‘*ibriy* (“go through”; NIV mg.) and is followed by Kaiser and BHS, who also advocate ‘shipyard’ instead of *harbour*. Presumably, this would then translate, ‘Come to the service of your land: here is no shipyard any more’—it is quite a different matter to say what it might mean. The somewhat bland action of BHS in urging the deletion of *as ... the Nile* ‘as a gloss’ lacks evidence.

⁷¹ On the form *mā’uznehā* with insertional *n* before the suffix see GKC 200, 670 (where it is thought to be a Phoenician form; cf. Delitzsch); cf. Nu. 23:13.

person who can *find no rest*). This is reserved for the last stanza so as to make a connection between the downfall of Tyre and Sidon and the way it has come about. In verse 11 the Lord ‘gave an order’. We are now to learn who received his command and why the displaced Sidonians will find no rest. Tiglath-pileser of Assyria began his bid for world dominion in 745 and by 738 he was able to impose a military governor on Tyre. Tyre, however, continued to be restive under Assyrian overlordship and in 729 was compelled to pay an indemnity of 150 gold talents. Shalmaneser (727–722) besieged Tyre unsuccessfully, and at the end of the eighth century BC Tyre was still in rebellion, negotiating with Egypt against Assyria. Sennacherib laid the mainland waste in 701 and did vast damage to Tyrian trade. According to Erlandsson ‘only with the decline of Assyria around 630 did Tyre regain complete independence and the capability of creating new riches.’⁷² But an inveterate tendency to meddle in revolt meant continuing trouble with the great empires. Nebuchadnezzar opened a thirteen-year siege in 586 but without ultimate success. Likewise, the Persian Artaxerxes III besieged Tyre in 333, but the rock citadel withstood all assailants till it fell at last to Alexander the Great in 332. Thus we see that it is needless to look outside Isaiah’s period for justification for an oracle on Tyre. He would be lacking in a sense of the issues of the day if he failed to include Tyre in his purview. As far as Isaiah’s forecast of the fall of Tyre is concerned, if seizure of the rock city is required, then it was not until Alexander that this was fulfilled. The thrust of the oracle, however, is that Tyre becomes unsafe for shipping and its commerce is brought to a standstill with large-scale loss of life and many refugees. In the light of this, a reference in verse 13 to Assyria as the agent has the merit of simplicity. The devastations wrought by Sargon in southern Mesopotamia were notorious. Seven kings from Cyprus were present at his coronation in Babylon, and Sargon records that when they heard what he was doing in Chaldea ‘their hearts were rent, fear fell on them’. If Isaiah were here looking forward to Sennacherib he could well say *Look at the land of the Babylonians* (lit. Chaldeans) as a warning. This provides all the historical framing that verse 13 needs. If the refugees wonder why they will not be received and allowed to ‘rest’ anywhere, they need only ask who would risk provoking Assyria by receiving them. The translation *this people that is now of no account* is somewhat paraphrastic, but the Hebrew (*zeh hā'ām lō' hāyâ*) is terse, meaning maybe,

⁷² Erlandsson, p. 101.

‘this non-existent people’. Thanks to Assyria’s savage attentions, Babylon has become a place for desert creatures. Made it ($\sqrt{yāṣad}$, ‘founded it’) is used in the sense of giving something a new beginning (cf. 2 Ch. 24:27; 31:7 in the RV). This verb and the final verb, turned it into, are singular, denoting the actions of Assyria personified; the intervening verbs, raised and stripped, are plural, denoting the actions of Assyria’s allies and armies. Their siege towers is (lit.) ‘his [Assyria’s] siege towers’. The word *bahûn* is unknown elsewhere but may be related to *bahān* (‘watchtower’) in 32:14.⁷³ Fortresses (*‘arm^enōt*) would be better translated as ‘palaces’.

14 This verse is an inclusio with verse 1. The only alteration here is the mention of Tyre as a fortress or ‘stronghold’ for the ships of Tarshish. Tarshish itself may have a new-found liberty (10) now the constraint of Tyre is gone, but Tyre’s trade was the financial bulwark for the shipping. Without that, they are exposed and fragile. If verse 1 says they have no place to go, then verse 14 says they have no security of work.

Postscript: the rise and renewal of Tyre (23:15–18)

Isaiah offers another interim fulfilment in the recovery of Tyre from its time of eclipse after a gap of seventy years. Beyond that again there lies the renewed Tyre as ‘holiness to the Lord’.

15 The period referred to here can be identified as lying between the campaigns of Sennacherib in 701 and the decline of Assyria, with consequent recovery of Tyrian strength, about 630 (see on verse 13 above.) The span of a king’s life/‘as the days of one king’ is plainly intended to make the seventy years a precise rather than a symbolic time, like the earlier qualifying phrase, ‘according to the years of a hired worker’ in 16:14; 21:16. Records of each reign were kept in what was called ‘the book of the deeds of the days’ (e.g. 1 Ki. 14:29). So, every day of seventy years will be recorded and, as it were, crossed off until the stated time is fulfilled. The foremost thought here is the mercenary motive that was ever the mainspring of Tyre’s activity; all, as in prostitution, was done for money. Cf. Amos 1:9, where the prophet’s complaint against Tyre is that nothing was allowed to stand in the way of making profit, neither human pity, nor the moral obligations of covenant.

⁷³ MT Kethib offers *bhyn* for *bahûn*. For us this only replaces one unknown word with another. KB suggests emending to *bahannāw* (‘his watch-towers’).

17 *Deal with* is too precise, carrying overtones of discipline. The word is *pāqad* ('will visit'), and its meaning is always shaped by its context. Since Tyre reappears unchanged on the world scene, driven by financial motives (*hire ... prostitute ... trade*), engaged in world-wide commerce (*all the kingdoms*), we might even translate it 'the Lord will restore Tyre'.

18 The new Tyre would be there to supply materials for the temple at the time of the return from Babylon (Ezr. 3:7) but, like the return itself, this was only a token of the fulfilment yet to come (Rev. 21:24–26; cf. Is. 60:5). For *profit* (*sahar*) see on *market-place* in verse 3. Deuteronomy 23:18 <19> specifically forbade the bringing of the earnings ('*etnān*; the same word as here) of prostitution as an offering to the Lord. What a picture then Isaiah gives of transformation: the converted prostitute consecrating all that the old life, now past and gone, had meant and gained (cf. Lk. 7:44–46; Jn. 12:3). Isaiah speaks first of a new status: Tyre's *earnings will be set apart for the LORD*/‘holiness to the Lord’. This is the word which adorned the high priest (Ex. 28:36) and is used of what belongs to the divine sphere of reality (Lv. 27:9–10). Secondly, he speaks of a new spirit: these earnings will *not be stored up or hoarded*. The old mercenary spirit will be replaced by generosity. Thirdly, there will be a new allegiance and concern for *those who live before the LORD*, i.e. Zion's people (Pss. 27:4; 84:4, 7). The same thought is expressed in Psalm 87:4, where Tyre is granted a birthright in Zion. It is also the spirit of the ‘pilgrimage to Zion’ theme (see 2:2–4; 45:14–25; 60:1–14; Rev. 21:24–26).

3. The third cycle. Two cities in contrast: endurance through to glory (24:1–27:13)

Each element in this title is important. The first concerns the form of the section; the second its central theme; and the third its relation to the two preceding cycles.⁷⁴

⁷⁴ These chapters have often been called ‘The Isaiah Apocalypse’, but even where the title is retained today it seems to be accompanied by an increasing awareness that it does not suit the content. Clements urges that it is their ‘thoroughgoing eschatological character that has allowed several interpreters to describe ... chapters 24–27 as apocalyptic.’ J. Lindblom, though he called his book *Die Jesaja-Apokalypse* (Lund, 1938), gives these chapters the correctly descriptive title of ‘cantata’—for they are indeed eschatological poems mingled with songs. To be sure, apocalyptic is an outgrowth from prophetic eschatology (see Johnson; P. D. Hanson, *The Dawn of Apocalyptic*

It is ‘The third cycle’, not ‘The third cycle of oracles’, because the oracle structure is not used. This is a continuous whole, incorporating poetry, prose and song. It is, nevertheless, closely integrated with the preceding cycles.

The central theme is a city destroyed and a city established. The former is ‘the ruined city’ (24:10; cf. 25:2, 12; 26:5; 27:10) and the latter is referred to by location, e.g. Mount Zion (24:23; 25:6–7, 10; 27:13), or simply as a city or as Jerusalem (24:23; 26:1; 27:13). Of all sections of Isaiah this offers the least help in discerning the situations which prompted the individual units. It is very likely, for example, that 25:10–12 originated with the Moab material in 15:1–16:14, and indeed if the initial ‘For’ of 25:10 is translated ‘When’, it follows well after 16:12, matching the ‘when’ clause in 16:4b. Equally, much of this material seems to have been composed for its present place, as Kaiser holds regarding 24:7–12; 25:1–5; 26:1–6. In any case, context is all important, and the hunt for ‘original’ settings is both indecisive and unhelpful. To understand chapters 24–27 we must first see it as a single complex and then place it in the ‘grand strategy’ of chapters 13–27. In 2:2–4 a Zion hymn expressed a universal hope centred on the city as a magnet to the whole world. The companion truth, however, to the call to the nations (‘Come, let us go up’; 2:3) is a call to the Lord’s people, ‘Come, let us walk’ (2:5). Though they lived in Zion they had already lost the Zion ideal and they too must come on pilgrimage back to the Lord. Chapters 24–27 express this double pilgrimage on a grand scale:

A¹ The Lord’s harvest from a destroyed world (24:1–13)

Destruction (1–12)

Gleanings (13)

[Fortress, 1975]), but *Isaiah 24–27* lies far nearer to prophecy than it does to apocalyptic. The characteristics of apocalyptic (H. H. Rowley, *The Relevance of Apocalyptic* [SPCK, 1943]; L. Morris, *Apocalyptic* [IVP, 1972]) are notably absent. W. R. Millar (*Isaiah 24–27 and the Origin of Apocalyptic* [Scholars Press, 1976]) undertook a close study of prosodic style, patterns of themes and historical setting. He found reason to place the author ‘close to Second Isaiah’ and urged that on many levels the writer of *Isaiah 24–27*, Second Isaiah and Canaanite poets exhibit ‘similarity in prosodic style’; that the ‘thematic pattern’ is ancient, ‘even having its origin in Canaanite religion’; and that the whole is ‘proto-apocalyptic’ and by ‘a disciple of Isaiah ... who shared his vision for the reconstruction of Israel’.

- B¹ The song of the world remnant ([24:14–16a](#))
- C¹ The sinful world overthrown ([24:16b–20](#))
 - D¹ The waiting world ([24:21–23](#))
 - E¹ The song of the ruined city ([25:1–5](#))
 - F MOUNT ZION ([25:6–12](#))
 - E² The song of the strong city ([26:1–6](#))
 - D² The waiting people of God ([26:7–21](#))
 - C² Spiritual forces of evil overthrown ([27:1](#))
 - B² The song of the remnant of the people ([27:2–6](#))
 - A² The Lord's harvest from a destroyed people ([27:7–13](#))
 - Destruction ([7–11](#))
 - Gleanings ([12–13](#))

Note that:

- a. Parts A¹–E¹ are concerned with the outside world and E²–A² with the Lord's people. Mount Zion is central to both, thus fulfilling the vision of [2:2–4:5](#). Part F stresses universality with ‘all peoples’ ([25:6–7](#)), ‘all nations’ ([25:7](#)), ‘all faces’ and ‘all the earth’ ([25:8](#)).
- b. While the world is drawn to Mount Zion (A¹–E¹), the Lord's people start there (E²). The believing people know the strength of the city to begin with ([26:1](#)) but know also that it needs faith and patience to inherit the promises (D²). Great spiritual issues have to be settled (C²) and, even though they are in the Lord's care (B²), judgment must come to the house of God before the final harvest (A²).
- c. Parts E¹ and E² reflect this situation. The world remnant is conscious of what it has been saved from; the Lord's people are concerned to secure all that has been promised to believers.
- d. Parts C¹ and C² not only have matching themes but share the motifs of flood ([24:18b](#)) and sea ([27:1](#)).
- e. Parts D¹ and D² are linked by the theme of waiting: ‘after many days’ ([24:22](#)), ‘we wait’ ([26:8](#)). Note also the link of ‘punished’ ([24:22](#)) and ‘punish’ ([26:21](#)).⁷⁵

⁷⁵ Clements offers an excellent note covering current approaches to [Isaiah 24–27](#) and urges correctly that the thematic approach is ‘more credible and satisfactory’. Multiple authorship is

The third element in the title places this cycle in the context of chapters 13–27. Many attempts have been made to identify the unnamed city of 24:10 etc.,⁷⁶ and no doubt elements in the description are suited by these various locations, but all such identifications are beside the point. Nowadays we use the expression ‘global village’ to describe how, in the twentieth century, the world has contracted so that what concerns one touches all; everything is potentially of world importance. Isaiah’s concern is similar but not identical. He has in mind the ‘global city’, the whole world organized on a human-centred, non-spiritual basis. He has now taken us past the point where we say,

widely advocated, one building on another in a sustained attempt to express their sense of imminent eschatological events. Wilderberger adopts the same line. He thinks that 24:1–6, 14–20; 26:7–21 provided a ‘groundwork’ and that it was developed by successive insertions: eschatological images (e.g. 24:21–23), songs (25:1–5; 26:1–6) and other additions, such as 27:1. Johnson challenges this ‘growth process’ (*Wachstumsprozess* is Wilderberger’s word) on two grounds. First, that those who advocate it have failed to agree as to the units which were progressively added and to offer a convincing rationale for their addition; and secondly, that the hypothesis is inadequate to account for ‘the unified work which comprises Isaiah 24–27’. He speaks of ‘an emerging consensus that Isaiah 24–27 is an ordered composition’. His own view is that a single author produced 24:1–20 on the eve of the destruction of Jerusalem in 587; during the exile he added 24:21–27:1 in confidence of the victory of the Lord and the destruction of Babylon; and finally brought the triumph theme to a conclusion with 27:2–13.

⁷⁶ E.g. an unknown Moabite city (Eissfeldt); Babylon, at various dates (Lindblom; cf. G. W. Anderson, *Isaiah 24–27 Reconsidered*, VTS, 9 [1963]); Jerusalem (Millar, Johnson). Clements, Wilderberger and Kaiser advocate a symbolic view—the city as a ‘representation of the larger reality of world evil’. The unity of the whole section (chapters 13–27) and the development displayed above substantiate this view. The city theme is suited to Isaiah as to no other prophet, and arguments against his authorship are not strong when weighed against this suitability and against the intrinsic likelihood that his own predictions must have driven him to probe the future in the way these chapters do. It is impossible to think of Isaiah silently acquiescing in the end of Zion, accepting the negation of all the promises and the voiding of all his hopes. Would he have dismissed it with a shrug and a sigh over what might have been? Surely it is obligatory on him that, having accorded the first round to Babylon, he look on to the end of the contest? If he did not do so by his own volition, his hearers and his disciples would compel him.

'Babylon has fallen', and brought us to the point where the spirit of Babylon is encapsulated in 'the city without meaning' ([24:10](#)), in whose fall the earth itself returns to primeval meaninglessness ([24:18b–20](#); cf. [Gn. 1:2](#); [Je. 4:23ff.](#)) and beyond which shines the city where the Lord reigns ([24:21–23](#)). This cycle, therefore, is the fitting climax of the whole series. The historical structures of Isaiah's time (chapters [13–20](#)) yielded to a picture, blurred round the edges but clear in its essentials (chapters [21–23](#)), but now the prophet strains forward to the eschaton where there are still five strands of truth:

- a. Preservation of the Lord's people amid a crashing world ([24:1–20](#); esp. verses [13–16a](#)).
- b. The certainty of the promises even when they seem to delay ([24:21–23](#)).
- c. The satisfaction of the whole world on Mount Zion ([25:1–12](#)).
- d. The people of God caught up in all the turmoil of history but already within the secure city ([26:1–20](#)).
- e. The final gathering ([27:1–13](#)).

In the first series, Moab turned, through pride, from security in Zion (chapters [15–16](#)); in the second, Gentile needs remained unmet by mutual aid ([21:13–17](#)); now, on Mount Zion, every need is met, though Moabite pride still excludes ([25:1–12](#)). The first two series exposed the collapse of the people of God into worldly securities ([17:1ff.](#)) and self-sufficiency (chapter [22](#)), but now the picture is wholly positive (chapter [26](#)). There is security in the Lord, waiting, the discipline of patience, mourning over shortcomings, and protection—a picture of a true church expecting the final harvest. Within the Isaianic literature as we have received it these chapters show how in the end the world's king will come to his throne.

a. The city of meaninglessness: world history planned around the people of God ([24:1–20](#))

At the heart of this passage lies a truth found also in the parallel passages in the preceding cycles: the centrality of the Lord's people in the Lord's plans for the world (see on [14:2](#); [21:10](#)). When the final crisis comes on the world, this principle holds firm: safety for the Lord's remnant. Thus we hear the stilling of the song of the world (verses [7–12](#)) and the rising of the song of the remnant (verses [13–16a](#)). In a collapsing world the people whose joy is in the Lord are secure.

A¹ The earth devastated: divine action (1–3)

B¹ The withering of the world: sin and the curse (4–6)

C¹ The song stilled: the fall of the city (7–12)

C² The song heard: world-wide gleanings (13–16b)

B² Personal wasting away: grief over treachery and its outcome (16c–18d)

A² The earth broken up: moral/spiritual causation (18e–20)

Further elements of the integrity of this poem are detailed below, but first its general background in the flood narrative (Gn. 6–9) should be noted. Both have references to the ‘windows [NIV, ‘floodgates’] of the heavens’ being ‘opened’ (cf. verse 18c and Gn. 7:11); both refer to the ‘everlasting covenant’ (cf. verse 5 and Gn. 9:16); and in verse 6 the ‘curse’, in the context of the wine/vine theme of verse 7, links with Noah the vine-dresser and the imposition of the curse in the post-diluvian world (Gn. 9:20, 25).

The earth devastated: divine action (24:1–3)

This section is bracketed by the inclusios *lay waste* (1), *laid waste* (3; $\sqrt{bāqāq}$) and *See, the LORD* (1; *hinnēh yhwh*), ‘For’ *the LORD* (3; *kī yhwh*; the NIV omits ‘For’). The emphasis is on total devastation, including both natural and human worlds (1). No-one will escape, yet no charge is levelled. The word of the Lord has been spoken (3) but the verses offer no justification for it. Thus the section cannot stand alone but needs the remainder of the poem, and especially the matching verses 18b–20, to complete the picture.

1 On *See, the LORD* (*hinnēh yhwh*), Wilderberger notes that “Behold” with the divine name and a following participle is typical of Isaiah (3:1; 8:7; 10:33; etc.) but rare elsewhere (cf. Johnson).⁷⁷ For the involvement of the world itself as caught up in the judgment about to fall on its inhabitants see on 2:12ff. It is intrinsic to the doctrine of creation that human beings in sin are the supreme environmental threat. *Lay waste* is a participle of imminent (though undated) action. $\sqrt{bāqāq}$ (cf. 19:3; Ho. 10:1) used to be translated ‘to empty’ (BDB) but means ‘lay waste’ (KB). The word *devastate* ($\sqrt{bālaq}$) is found only here and in Nahum 2:10 <11>. This vocabulary of destruction of the physical world is preparing for the description of the *city* in verse 10 as ‘of

⁷⁷ See 3:1; 8:7; 10:33; 19:1; 22:17; 24:1; 26:21. Outside Isaiah, only Mi. 1:3 and Am. 7:4 has this. The construction of *hinnēh* with the first person suffix referring to the Lord, who following participle is widespread throughout the prophets.

emptiness/meaninglessness', the *tōhû* of [Genesis 1:2](#). Scatter ($\sqrt{pîs}$; as [Gn. 11:4](#), [8–9](#)) also sets the scene for the *city*, looking back to the original Babel, the city where people began their still-continuing search for a cohesive society based on their own abilities and technologies.

² See the note above on verses [1–3](#) and cf. [Hosea 4:1–10](#), especially verse [9.7⁸](#) The contrasting pairs form an idiom of totality (see on [3:1](#)), viewing humankind religiously (*priests ... people*), domestically (*master ... servant, ... mistress ... maid*) and commercially (*seller ... buyer etc.*). Every aspect of life is under sentence along with every group and individual.

³ *The earth will be completely laid waste* uses the same words as verse [1](#) but alters the active (what the Lord will do) to passive (what the earth will endure). See [3:1; 8:7; 10:33; 19:1; 22:17; 24:1; 26:21](#). Outside Isaiah, only [Mi. 1:3](#) and [Am. 7:4](#) has this. The construction of *hinnēh* with the first person suffix referring to the Lord, with following participle is widespread throughout the prophets. The threatened deed will come to fruition. *Completely laid waste* and *totally plundered* are both infinitive absolute constructions. *Completely* and *totally* qualify not *earth* (i.e. meaning that whole earth will suffer plundering) but the verbal idea: it will be an act of devastation which includes everything that devastation implies. *Plundered* ($\sqrt{bâzaz}$) is not used in a general sense of 'destroying' but always with the idea of someone carrying off spoil. The enemy is left unnamed. Here again this opening section cannot stand alone. The creation, flood and Babel imagery of the remainder of the poem make the Lord the adversary and victor. *The LORD has spoken this word*/‘For it is the Lord who has spoken this word’ is typical of Isaiah (cf. [1:2, 20; 21:17; 22:25; 25:8; 40:5; 58:14](#)).

The withering of the world: sin and the curse ([24:4–6](#))

Johnson perceptively notes that the imagery of these verses changes from that of verses [1–3](#): earthquake ([1](#)) and military conquest ([3](#)) become ‘withering’. He goes beyond what is required, however, when he suggests that this may hint at a difference of authorship. As we noted above, verses [1–3](#) predict devastation but offer no justification of it, and it is

⁷⁸ Kaiser holds that the present passage arose when a late post-exilic writer made use of [Ho. 4:1ff.](#) to develop a picture of world ruin. But the language here is typically Isaianic, e.g. his love of lists (cf. [3:1–3, 16; 10:9–11, 28–32](#)).

to this that the present verses proceed. Since the justification proffered is the inner, personal reality of sin, the vision of a blighted nature is suitable, humankind communicating their contagion to the world. The section is bracketed by references to the fading world (4; *hā'ārēṣ*) and a diminishing humanity (6; *yōšēbē'ērēṣ*). These verses, full of Isaiah's deliciously assonantal Hebrew, enclose the central accusations of verse 5.

4 In *dries up and withers* ('*ab^elā nāb^elā*)⁷⁹, the first verb could be $\sqrt{\text{ābēl}}$ ('to dry up'; see KB) but is more suitably the much more frequent verb of the same spelling meaning 'to wither'. The problem is not the external factor of drought but the internal factor of blight. On *world* (*tēbēl*) see 13:11. *The exalted of the earth*/‘the height of the people of the earth’ is an unparalleled expression. Taken at face value, it means that even earth’s exalted ones are infected with this deadly blight. A frequent emendation leads to ‘Height as well as earth languishes,’⁷⁹ but a reference to people rather than place is suitable here, bridging over to the explanatory verse 5.

5 *Defiled* ($\sqrt{\text{hānēp}}$) is used with a strong meaning, ‘to pollute’. (On the idea of ‘polluting’ the earth see Nu. 35:33; Ps. 106:38; Je. 3:1–2, 9.) As God’s creation, the world itself is morally sensitive, and the ‘thorns and thistles’ of Genesis 3:18 illustrate the two sides of this sensitivity. On the one hand, they evidence the way in which earth itself fights against sinners. It does not readily yield its bounty to them but turns its productive powers to their disadvantage. On the other hand, the fact that an earth which the Lord pronounced good can produce thorns and thistles is evidence that its nature has been damaged and the garden is in the process of becoming the wilderness. The earth has been defiled *by its people*/‘under its people’, i.e. under their domination, their misuse, under the burden of them. Yet it was not so in Eden, where Adam (lit.) ‘served’ (Gn. 2:15) the garden. So what has happened? Three charges are abruptly stated (the *and* in verse 5d should be omitted):

1. Transgression of revealed truth. *Disobeyed* ($\sqrt{\text{ābar}}$, ‘crossed over’) is widely used to mean ‘to transgress’ (cf. *parabainō* in the New Testament). They have transgressed *the laws*.⁸⁰ The basic idea of *tōrā* is not ‘authoritative imposition’ (*lex*) but authoritative

⁷⁹ Q^a reads a singular verb ('*mll*), leading BHS to suggest '*umlal mārōm 'im hā'ārēṣ* ('the height wilts along with the earth'). This could refer to the upper or spiritual world (see verse 21; Ps. 144:7). The thought is not unsuitable to the present context. The city typifies a world structured without God but behind this lie dark spiritual forces and they too will be destroyed.

instruction. The first charge, therefore, is that they refused to hold to and live by divine revelation.

2. Changing what was intended for perpetuity. *Violated* is (lit.) ‘they altered’. The verb ($\sqrt{hālap̄}$) is used of one thing replacing another (cf. 21:1). The noun *ḥōq* (translated *statutes*) comes from $\sqrt{hāqaq}$ meaning ‘to carve’ or ‘to engrave’ and hence has the idea of perpetuity. The second charge is of introducing an innovative morality.

3. *Broken* ($\sqrt{pārar}$) is a technical term in covenant vocabulary, deeper than transgressing or disobeying, actually annulling, nullifying or setting aside the whole concept of covenant relationship and life (e.g. Dt. 31:20; cf. for the force of the verb, Nu. 30:8 <9>). The expression *the everlasting covenant* is used of the Noahic covenant (Gn. 9:16), the Lord’s covenant dispensation reaching back to Abraham (Ps. 105:10), the Sabbath within the Mosaic covenant (Lv. 24:8) and the Davidic covenant (2 Sa. 23:5) and its future Messianic counterpart (Is. 55:3; 61:8). While this whole passage is resonant with flood motifs, it would be mistaken to tie this covenant reference in any way exclusively to Noah, even though its ambience starts with him.⁸¹ Every covenant dispensation had its regulatory aspect, however undeveloped it may have been in comparison with the normative Mosaic system. This may be why Isaiah used the plural *laws*, so as to cover every period and aspect of covenant law-giving. Even Abraham, who lived under the broadest of divine precepts (Gn. 17:2), is said to have kept the Lord’s ‘laws’ (Gn. 26:5). In essence, the annulling of the covenant was the refusal to live in the

⁸⁰ The plural of *tōrâ* only occurs eleven times out of 220 (e.g. Gn. 26:5; Ex. 16:28; Ps. 105:45). It is either a generalizing plural ('laws whatever they may be') or a plural of application ('laws covering every aspect of life').

⁸¹ Johnson argues that the reference to laws and statutes rules out the Noahic covenant. He rightly observes that this covenant was a unilateral dispensation of divine promise and feels that the idea of imposed obligation would be unsuitable. But every covenant dispensation was a unilateral divine promise, with its legal counterpart—not making the covenant a reciprocal arrangement but an outreaching of grace meeting a response along divinely ordained lines. The Noahic covenant too, therefore, had its ‘law’ (Gn. 9:1–7), and the use in Nu. 35:33 of the verb *hānēp* of polluting the land by blood-guilt is not unsuited to the content of Gn. 9:1ff. Cf. also the wide, generalized use of the plural ‘laws’. But, as noted above, the ambience of this covenant reference only starts with Noah, it does not terminate there.

fellowship which God opened.

6 This verse rounds off the section.⁸² Verse 4 dealt with earth and people languishing and wilting and verse 5 noted the moral cause—the earth was burdened by its apostate people. Verse 6 takes matters to their final diagnosis. Sin has the effect described because there is a divine agency at work, a *curse*. The idiom of ‘indefiniteness for the sake of emphasis’ implies ‘a curse—you know the one I mean!’. This is ‘the curse of the covenant’ (Lv. 26:25–45; Dt. 11:26–28; 28:15ff.; Dn. 9:11; Zc. 5:3), not the Lord breaking off his covenant but operating in covenant wrath to rid the covenant community of false or pretended members. But though (lit.) ‘its inhabitants are guilty’ yet the outcome is not total destruction but diminishment. The translation *are burned up* is very doubtful. The root $\sqrt{hārā}$ (‘to be hot’) is used almost exclusively to mean ‘to grow hot with anger’. *KB* suggests the sole appearance here of a verb found in Arabic meaning ‘to diminish in number’ is contextually suitable.⁸³ In *very few are left/ ‘humankind, a few’, ‘humankind’ (^enôš)* is often used of people in their human frailty. Both word and idea appear in the parallel oracle in 13:7, 12. If we ask how it is that when earth’s inhabitants are guilty (apparently without exception) any at all survive, the Noahic parallel must be invoked. For Noah was part of a totality under condemnation (Gn. 6:5–7) but was brought within a working of grace (Gn. 6:8). Thus here too ‘gleanings’ (13–16) will remain.⁸⁴

⁸² This verse could be taken as a case in point for Isaiah’s use of assonantal and rhyming techniques referred to in the introductory note on verses 4–6.

'al-kēn 'ālā 'āk^elā 'erēṣ

wayye's^emû yōš^ebē bāh

'al-kēn hārû yōš^ebē 'erēṣ

w^eniš'ar ^enôš miz'ār

⁸³ Q^a reads *hāw^erû* (‘grew pale’; cf. 29:22) and hence, ‘paled with fear’.

⁸⁴ However the formulaic ‘These are the generations of ...’ is to be understood, it does act as some sort of divider. Thus, Gn. 6:9 makes a new beginning, distinguishing Noah as the man of grace (verse 8) from Noah the man of righteousness (verse 9b). The wording ‘... found grace’ (verse 8) always points to the unworthiness, or felt unworthiness, of the recipient (e.g. Ruth 2:10). Thus, in reality, unmerited grace ‘finds’ Noah, and as a result of this he becomes the distinctive man among his contemporaries (verse 9).

The song stilled: the fall of the city (24:7–12)

This is the first of the two contrasting sections which lie at the heart of this poem: the end of the world's song. Verse 7 uses the same words as verse 4 (*dries up*/‘mourns’ and *withers*), so the two sections are linked together. According to verses 4–6, sin brought a curse on the earth and its people. Now we trace the progress of the deadly contagion as it kills the sources of joy (7), ends the experience of joy (8–9) and banishes joy itself (11), while the city lies ruined and defenceless (10, 12).

A¹ The source of joy gone (7a, 2 lines)

B¹ Joy stilled, satisfaction gone (7b–9, 6 lines)

C The city broken and empty (10, 2 lines)

B² Satisfaction lost, joy banished (11, 3 lines)

A² The source of security gone (12, 2 lines)

The line enumeration is based on setting out the Hebrew text in fifteen lines, mostly of three words each. The ‘feeling’ is as of a series of hammer blows, as if we were watching the city being brought to ruins. The subtle use of assonance cannot be reflected in translation but proclaims Isaiah’s authorship in every division of the poem, if not in every line.

7 The ‘party atmosphere’ of the city as it once was (*cf.* 5:11ff.) exposes its this-worldly philosophy of life. This is the serious backdrop to a picture of revelry. The only thing we need to know about their life was its dependence on the elation of alcohol. Not that the passage sets out to be a temperance tract (its stress on wine may owe everything to its Noahic background) but to instance a life-style looking wholly to what this world provides and seeking wholly an immediate and earthly satisfaction. The flaw in such a philosophy has already been exposed in verses 4–6. As God’s creation, the earth itself is morally sensitive and in the ultimate it will not ‘work’ for those who exclude its Creator. The irony, however, is this, that their spiritual state (5) is itself the blight which makes the earth mourn and wither so that, at one and the same time, they are depending on earth’s productive powers and destroying them. As verse 7a puts it, not only the fruit (*new wine*) but also the source (*vine*) are blighted. With this failure, life grinds to a halt. Even *the merrymakers*/‘joyful of heart’, those who have a naturally joyful temperament, need the help of alcohol and without it their natural joviality turns to its opposite (*groan*).

8 The outward evidence of revelry is the next victim. Lines a and c are exact images of each other in the MT: ‘the gaiety of the tambourines has ceased ... the gaiety of the harp has ceased’. The repetition conveys a sense of inevitability.

9 Even while this is happening the point is reached, within the revellers themselves, where their way of life ceases to give them any satisfaction. They drink their wine but cannot bring themselves to sing! Their beer is flat! To want nothing but this world is to end up with nothing but want.

10 What multitudes experience in the microcosm of personal experience (**7b–9**) will finally reach its appointed universal climax in the collapse of the whole this-worldly fabric of life, built on earth’s resources by human wit and work, without recourse to God. What could encapsulate this better than a city—the largest and most distinctive human product and the setting and would-be realization of humankind’s earliest endeavour to structure life (**Gn. 11:1–9**). *The ruined city* is an extremely unhappy translation, with ‘the city of chaos’ (RSV) a narrow second! It is the city of *tōhû*, the word translated ‘formless’ in **Genesis 1:2** where the first stage of the creative process was the material substrate of the world and it was *tōhû wābōhû* (‘formless and empty’). The divine potter had brought into being the clay but as yet it was without the impress of his hands; it did not contain inherently any meaning or purpose, nor any tendency towards them; it had no stability and no life; it was *tōhû*.⁸⁵ Jeremiah (**4:23**) had a vision of the world reverting to this state, deprived of all that makes it habitable and meaningful, dark, unstable, empty of life and without a hint of purposeful activity. In a word, without what only God can provide. The ‘city of *tōhû*’ lives without the ordering, life-giving hand of God, opting for a life on its own, within itself, depending on itself. Consequently, it is unstable and without purpose, spinning on the wheel but having dismissed the potter, its ever changing shapes and fashions not dictated by purpose but by whimsy. Life is simply one thing after another. Rejecting the moral absolutes of verse **5**, everything is relative and ultimately individualistic. Humankind’s great world city is ‘the city without meaning’—a veritable Babel—*redivivus* (**Gn. 11:iff.**), where they thought they could find on earth and in themselves all they needed for secure community and a future, and they found only disorder, division and meaninglessness.

⁸⁵ See **Gn. 1:2; Dt. 32:10; 1 Sa. 12:21; Jb. 6:18; 12:24; 26:7; Ps. 107:40; Is. 24:10; 34:11; 40:17, 23; 41:29; 44:9; 45:18, 19; 49:4; 59:4; Je. 4:23.**

Thus Isaiah looked through the Babylon he knew (13:1ff.) to the ongoing spirit of Babylon ever-present in world history (21:1–10), and finally to the ultimate Babel where at length humankind's self-sufficiency would bring their whole world about their ears. Within the ruin one feature is noted that *the entrance to every house is barred*. This speaks of the spirit of fear which pervades. Life in the city of meaninglessness is a lonely and scary thing. If it is no longer possible to get away from people (Gn. 11:8) then best shut oneself away from them!

11 This verse corresponds to verses 7b–9, sharing the same vocabulary, *wine* (9), *joy* (*śimḥâ*; a component of *merrymakers*, see on verse 7) and *gaiety* (8ac). In the parallel passage we saw the failure of stimulants, in both supply and effect. Here, with grim sadness, Isaiah observes the people of the city of meaninglessness crying out for failed remedies. For in that city, humankind, shut up to themselves, can only turn to what has already been tried and failed. Note also the three lines of verse 11 compared with the six lines of the parallel verses. This is deliberate; following the revelation of the broken city (10) the poem seems to tumble to a quick conclusion. Johnson translates *turns to gloom* more exactly as 'all rejoicing has reached its eventide'. *All gaiety is banished from the earth/ 'the gaiety of the earth has gone into captivity'*, i.e. has passed into other hands from which it cannot be recovered; it is, therefore, irretrievably lost.

12 This verse, (lit.) 'Ruin is left in the city, and to ruination the gate is crushed', speaks of destruction coupled with defencelessness. The two lines with which the section opened (7a) said that life in the city of meaninglessness is unsatisfying; the concluding two lines say that it is impossible.

The song heard: world-wide gleanings (24:13–16b)

Isaiah is a master of the unexpected note of hope (e.g. 6:13; 28:5). The 'cutting down' ($\sqrt{kātāt}$) of the gate (12) merges into a different sort of 'striking down' ($\sqrt{nāqāp}$; see below)—the blows which harvest the olive crop (13). The remaining *few* of verse 6 becomes a world-wide ingathering and, as the song of the city fades (9, 11), its place is taken by a different song rising from all over the earth (16). The verses have an almost eerie quality, as if we could see the *few* picking their way through the ruins, singing to the *Righteous One* as they go. Stylistically the section is marked by repetitions—*on the earth, among the nations* (13); *they raise, shout, acclaim* (14); *in the east, in the islands of the sea; the LORD, the LORD, the God of Israel* (15). In structure it consists of an explanation

(verse 13 opens with ‘For’), a description (14), a command (15) and a comment (16ab). Double statements of place link verses 13 and 15; *they* and *we* create a balance between verses 14 and 16ab.⁸⁶

13 The initial ‘For’ looks back over the whole preceding context, where statements of total destruction (1–3, 7–12) bracket the survival of a ‘few’ (4–6). This is now explained. Immediate connection with the foregoing is made by the double reference to *earth* and *nations/peoples* (see verse 4). Initially, the theme of total loss is continued. The ‘beating off of olives’ was the correct way to harvest them, and we are allowed to assume that this is the ‘grim reaper’ at work world-wide. But suddenly harvesting becomes gleaning, the careful gathering of what is left after (lit.) ‘grape harvest is finished’.

14 The emphatic pronoun merits translating as ‘These are they who ...’, identifying these newcomers on the scene with the ‘gleanings’ of verse 13 and the ‘few’ of verse 6, who now ‘lift up their voice, shout aloud of the majesty of the Lord, having raised a festal cry from the west’. The second verb ($\sqrt{rānan}$) points to loudness rather than joy. The last verb ($\sqrt{sāhal}$) is usually used of highly-charged, excited cries (10:30) or of praise (12:6). It is a perfect tense used as a participle.⁸⁷

15 The imperative *give glory* is a device to indicate the prophet’s own excitement in what he is hearing. The songs from *the west* (14) make him want world-wide praise to begin, therefore he calls for matching songs from *the east* and then from *the islands*. For

⁸⁶ Johnson links verses 14–16a with verse 16bff. as contrasting reactions, comparable to those in 22:1–14 where the prophet dissociates himself from the superficial and ill-considered joy of the city. But the joy of verses 13–16a is very different from that evidenced in chapter 22. There the sentiment expressed was of eating and drinking ‘for tomorrow we die’ (22:13), whereas here it is ‘Splendour to the Righteous One’. Could Isaiah fault this? Secondly, linking these two sections (verses 13–16a and 16bff.) destroys the internal balance of this section (see the outline on p. 197). Finally, the cry of verse 16b must be linked with 21:2 if the overall cohesion of chapters 13–27 is to be honoured.

⁸⁷ The perfect tense ($sāh^alû$) is often (BHS, Johnson) altered to imperative by a simple adjustment of a vowel. If this is done, however, *Therefore* (verse 15) must either be excised or emended, and the drama of the prophet’s call in verse 15 is ruined. The perfect tense can be understood as a circumstantial participial use (see Driver, 163; Davidson, 41; cf. Pss. 7:7; 11:2; 57:4<5>).

similar personal interventions, cf. Zephaniah 2:13 (MT); Zechariah 3:5. *East* is ‘*urîm* and is found only here in the plural. The word ‘*ûr*, apart from Ezekiel 5:2 (where it means ‘fire’, ‘fireplace’), occurs only in Isaiah (31:9, translated ‘furnace’; 44:16; 47:14; 50:11, all translated ‘fire’). Here, contextually, it refers to the ‘place of fire’, the east. On *islands* (‘*îyyîm*) see 11:11; 40:15; ‘ocean’s furthest coast’.⁸⁸ The ultimate gathering from the world is religiously focused on the one true God, *the name of the LORD, the God of Israel* (cf. 2:2–4). The nations will bring their glory with them (Rev. 21:24). They do not come to contribute religious insights into a common pool of truth but rather they have jettisoned whatever belonged to them nationally in favour of that which belongs to Israel, whose God alone they will name. ‘Thus’, says Kaiser, ‘the nations set forth, singing, upon their journey to Zion, and the great pilgrimage of the nations begins.’⁸⁹

16ab The prophet envisages himself in a listening company saying to one another, ‘From the ends of the earth we hear songs’ the theme of which is ‘*Glory to the Righteous One*’. Glory (*s̄ebî*; cf. 4:2; 28:5) means anything which adorns or beautifies; ‘splendour’ is a good equivalent. Only Isaiah uses this word of the Lord. *Righteous* could refer to the ingathering people (Skinner, Kissane), but it is unlikely that they would sing of themselves, no matter how aware they might be of the adorning that had come to them. Parallelism with verse 15 indicates a reference to the righteous Lord. Isaiah will use the title again in 41:2 and when he speaks of ‘that righteous one, my servant’ (53:11). Theologically it is noteworthy that the incoming remnant are primarily aware of the righteousness of the God who has saved them. In other words, his saving mercies are grounded in the satisfaction of his justice, not in the expression of his love.

Personal wasting away: grief over treachery and its outcome (24:16c–18d)

Parallel to the world and its people withering under the blight of sin (4–6), another voice speaks of personal wasting away. Within chapters 13–27, this cry is parallel to 21:3–4, where Isaiah, even though he had wished the destruction of Babylon, went into shock at the horror he foresaw. So here, the implications of the fall of the world city—the curse falling on earth and people alike (4–6) and no escape possible (17–

⁸⁸ The hymn, ‘For all the saints who from their labours rest’. Verses seven and eight of the hymn are a glorious commentary on this passage.

⁸⁹ Kaiser, p. 188.

18)—are like a wasting disease within himself. Though he has heard and called for the song of the remnant (15–16), he cannot abandon himself to joy because he has also seen the reality of sin and the curse.

16c *I waste away* (*rāzî*, ‘leanness is mine’) occurs nowhere else and is refused by KB. ✓*rāzâ* means ‘to make lean’ (17:4; Zp. 2:11) and gives rise to *rāzôn* (‘leanness’; 10:16). Possibly, a form *r̄zi* might have been expected, but maybe Isaiah lengthened it out for effect. It seems unreasonable to quibble over it. *Woe to me* is exactly as at 6:5. Isaiah now feels the condemnation of others as deeply as once he felt his own. *The treacherous betray! With treachery the treacherous betray!* is (lit.) ‘For betrayers betray: with betrayal betrayers betray.’ Possibly only Isaiah would dare to multiply the same word like this and achieve such literary effect. What sounds overdone in English is very powerful in Hebrew. See 21:2 in the parallel oracle, where the intention is the same as here: the immoral, dishonest, unreliable world continues on its way unchanged, unchanged too in its destination of destruction. The Bible seems to pick as the damning sins things which the world takes in its stride: the unclean speech of 6:5 and here petty unreliability and deceitfulness—the covenant breakers of verse 5.

17–18d Johnson’s ‘panic and pit and pitfall’ catches the assonance of *pāħad wāpāħat wāpāħ*. The final word actually means ‘trap’, *i.e.* not a chance accident but a deliberately set snare. The assonance hints that they belong to a single system of doom, as verse 18 elaborates. For similar pictures see Amos 5:19; 9:1–4. Compare the singular *O people of the earth/’O inhabitant of the earth* with the plural in the matching section (6): judgment is individualized.

The earth broken up: moral and spiritual causation (24:18e–20)

Matching the statement of destruction by the will of God (1–3), this final section of the poem, consonantly with the developing theme, repeats the emphasis on universal destruction but indicates its moral causation by the impressive understatement of a single word, *rebellion* (20c). The section opens with ‘For’ (18e), explaining why the judgment is inescapable (17–18d). It is like the flood, with the forces of heaven and earth combining (18e), under which the earth shatters (19ab) and loses its solidity (19c) and stability (20ab). From all this it will never recover (20d). The section opens with two lines (18ef) stating the physical forces of destruction and ends with two lines (20cd) stating the moral force of destruction. In between come three lines (19) united by the