

6. Victory, proclamation and pilgrimage (33:1–35:10)

The balanced presentation of the six ‘woes’ in this series continues into this final ‘woe’. We note the following broad comparisons between it and the matching third ‘woe’ (29:15–24): the Lebanon motif (29:17; 33:9; 35:2); the blind and the deaf (29:18; 35:5); joy in the Lord (29:19; 35:10); redemption (29:22; 35:9–10a); holiness (29:23; 35:8); salvation as an act of God (29:23; 33:3–6; 35:4, 9f.); the end of oppression (29:20; 33:19); spiritual transformation (29:24; 33:24; 35:8); the law established (29:20f.; 33:14–16); and the future seen in terms of the past (29:22; 34:5–15). The main thrust of the third ‘woe’ was transformation, both of the world and of ‘Jacob’. Both these lines are now developed in typical Old Testament terms, which means that the emphasis is on the transformation of Zion, which in turn becomes a universal message.

A¹ The salvation of Zion (33:1–6)

B¹ The judgment of the peoples (7–12)

A² The first universal proclamation (13; *hear*): Zion and its King (13–24)

B² The second universal proclamation (1; *Come near*): the final overthrow (34:1–17)

A³ The pilgrimage of the redeemed to Zion through a renewed world (35:1–10)

33:1–12 is significantly rooted in the time of the Assyrian threat and thus anchored in contemporary history, but by verse 12 the canvas is widening and thereafter the themes are eschatological. The basic motifs are provided by such Psalms as 46, 47, 48, 74, 83. The gathering of the nations in hostility against Zion is a concept rooted in the pre-exodus Egyptian situation, where the power of the ‘world’ threatened the extinction of the people of God; yet it was they who emerged unscathed. Entry into Canaan had not changed this situation, but history showed that in this matter the Lord had taken sides and that hostility to his people was hostility against himself. This faith was given poetical and religious expression in the Psalms and the cult. It was the faith Isaiah preached during the Sennacherib crisis and which he now sees in its final eschatological manifestation. To the last, the Lord remains the God who comes down to Egypt to redeem.

a. *Ultimate realities: salvation and wrath (33:1–12)*

In 30:27–33 Isaiah used the historical Assyrian threat as a ‘trailer’ of the fiery action of the Lord against ‘nations’ and ‘peoples’ (30:28). This balance is now reversed. Assyria is veiled behind the description *destroyer* and *traitor* (1), and the climax is a fire of judg-

ment upon *the peoples* (3, 12). There is, however, the same sense of an ‘eleventh hour’ divine rescue, with the people of God just managing to live one day at a time (2), despair taking hold within a wasted world (7–9) and the dramatic threefold divine *Now* of verse 10.

- A¹ The destroyer who will be destroyed (1)
- B¹ Appeal for divine grace and salvation (2)
- A² The peoples become the Lord’s plunder (3–4)
- B² The new Zion, abundant salvation (5–6)
- A³ Mourning over treachery, the world desolate (7–9)
- B³ Divine decision and action (10–12)

The salvation of Zion (33:1–6)

1 As in 21:2 and 24:16, Isaiah uses the moral inconsistency of Assyria as the hallmark of life in the last days. The background is Assyria’s apparent acceptance of Hezekiah’s attempt to buy himself out of trouble (2 Ki. 18:13–18), yet the attack on Jerusalem was continued as if no agreement had been reached. The one who has *not been destroyed*, i.e. the one acting on the principle that might is right, seems so far to have ‘got away with it’. The second *Woe to you* (1c) is an NIV addition. The charge moves from physical destructiveness to moral unscrupulousness. The use of every means to secure domination is accompanied by a willingness to use any means to achieve his end. *Who have not been betrayed* is (lit.) ‘O betrayer ... whom they [people/others] have not betrayed’. Nothing provoked the treacherous action except the treacherous one’s own lack of scruple. ‘When you stop⁵² betraying, they will betray you’—not that the Lord would or will reply with any lowering of his standards but that the punishment will be exactly what the crime merits (cf. Dt. 19:18–19). The Lord’s perfect management of human affairs guarantees that for every trickster there is a trickster to outdo him, until in the end all alike perish in their cleverness.

2 By *Woe* (1) the people of God dissociate themselves from the code by which the world lives; by *O LORD* they dissociate themselves from the resources by which the world lives. Both the moral code for life and the resources for living are from heaven.

⁵² *Stop* (in *stop betraying*) translates *kann^elōtā* (from √ *kālā*), and this is adopted by Kissane, KB, BHS, etc. It is such an obvious solution to a difficulty that it would be hard to affirm its originality.

On *gracious* see 30:18. *Long* ($\sqrt{qāwâ}$), ‘wait’; (8:17) is a mark of the remnant, combining the restfulness of waiting with the confidence of sure expectation. *Our strength*/‘their arm’ is the organ of strong personal action (52:10), strength for life. There may be here a snatch of liturgical form, with the leader saying, ‘be their arm’ and the congregation replying, ‘Be our salvation indeed ...’. In any case, instead of a prosaic statement that in such a time of crisis the believing church resorts to prayer (cf. Acts 12:5) Isaiah inserts a telling cameo of prayer taking place. The alteration to ‘our arm’ is the worst sort of pedantic tampering. *Every morning* speaks of daily strength for daily needs. *Our salvation* is preceded by the particle *'ap* (unrepresented in the NIV), which has the sense ‘yea more’.

3 *The thunder of your voice*/‘the sound of tumult/multitude’ may be a reference to the rumoured Egyptian advance in 2 Kings 19:9. The word *hāmōn* is not used of the noise of thunder. *Flee* and *scatter* are both perfect tenses (perfects of certainty), as if the praying people had already seen their prayer answered. *Rise up* is ‘because of your exaltedness’. The noun does not occur elsewhere but is unexceptionable. The idea matches the cognate verb in verse 10. However great the threat in human eyes, all that is needed is for the Lord to stand up!

4 The battle is over (*plunder* is being taken) as soon as it started (cf. Rev. 19:19–20). *O nations* is an NIV addition. There is no certainty of identification but *young locusts* represent some stage of locust development (1 Ki. 8:37; Ps. 78:46; Joel 1:4). *Men pounce*⁵³ is the enthusiastic entering upon the fruits of the Lord’s victory.

5 This verse continues the thought of the ‘rising up’ of verse 4. *Exalted*/‘proves himself to be high’ ($\sqrt{sāgab}$) is exactly as at 2:11, 17. The uprising of the Lord may astonish his enemies and fill his people with fresh excitement, but in itself it is nothing remarkable: it expresses what has always been true. *Will fill* is a perfect of certainty, meaning ‘is sure to/has determined to’. On *justice* and *righteousness* see 1:26–27; 32:1, 16.

6 The Lord will be the *sure foundation*/‘the stability’ of the new Zion. In contrast with the ‘time [$\bar{e}t$] of distress’ (2), the Lord’s people, following his victory (5), will enter upon their characteristic ‘times’, marked by immunity from danger and alarm and grounded in the Lord himself. He will also be the city’s resources, ‘a store of full salvation’. *Store* (*hōsen*) is from $\sqrt{hāsan}$ (‘to be strong’; cf. 1:31), and hence ‘store’ as practical resource for

⁵³ *Pounce* is a participle without any subject expressed (cf. 21:11; 32:12; Driver 135:6).

life. In verse 2 *salvation* was the divine supply sufficient for every emergent need. So here, the plural ‘salvations’ emphasizes the rich variety of divine resource. In particular, *wisdom*⁵⁴ for the true guidance of life and *knowledge* of the truth, which gives foundation to wisdom (29:14, 18). *The fear of the LORD is the key to this treasure* is (lit.) ‘the fear of the LORD, that is his treasure’. To whom does *his* refer? Zion is feminine and Judah is not mentioned in this context, therefore, the reference must be to the Lord and what he has treasured up in store for his people. The climax of the state of bliss promised in the matching ‘woe’ (29:23) was to acknowledge the holiness of the Lord and sense his awesomeness. To fear him with a true fear is not a human emotion worked up but a gift he has in store for those he delights to bless.

The judgment of the peoples (33:7–12)

The background to this is the Assyrian times. The *brave men* are the military leaders coming belatedly, like Hezekiah (37:3), to a realization of their ineffectiveness. The *envoys*, those sent to negotiate the terms of surrender (2 Ki. 18:14), now weep as they discover how they have been duped. Neither human power nor human wisdom have proved sufficient. The invasion has left *highways* and *roads* deserted, and the prospects of peace by *treaty* are in ruins along with the whole landscape. Humankind without God only brings desolation.

7 *Their brave men* (*'er'ellām*) is found nowhere else but is best understood (with Delitzsch) as a form of the word *'ari'ēl* (2 Sa 23:20; 1 Ch. 11:22; cf. on 15:9) with a base meaning ‘their warriors’.⁵⁵ In context it is impossible not to hear an echo of the ‘Ariel’ of 29:1, 7, probably with the thought of humankind usurping the prerogative of the Lord and trusting their own ‘fire-power’. Both ‘hawks’ (*brave men*) and ‘doves’ (*envoys of peace*) are equally at their wits end. *In the streets* (i.e. openly, publicly) there is no ‘cover-up’ of this crisis.

8 When people choose to live by their own abilities and policies, it is not only the great issues of life which become unmanageable (the weeping of verse 7), but the ordi-

⁵⁴ The form here is *hok*, 51:21). Possibly these are ‘cases of intentional reversion to the old feminine ending’ for euphonic reasons.

⁵⁵ Kissane alters the vowels to *'arī'ēlīm* (‘the Arielites’, ‘people of Ariel’; 29:1) and in the following line changes *šālōm* (‘peace’) to *šālēm* (‘Salem’).

nary activities of life (*highways ... travellers ... roads*) also grind to a halt. The passive translation, *the treaty is broken*, is idiomatically possible, but the reference in verse 1 to an individual betrayer favours the literal translation ‘He has nullified the covenant, despised cities.’⁵⁶ In other words, he has set no value on people, acted without moral concern, scorned the fortified opposition ranged against him, and set no value on human life as such. This is a brilliant analysis of the ‘mind’ of the power-politician.

9 This is the climax of what began as the thorns of [Genesis 3:18](#). The start of sinful people’s corruption of God’s fair earth was as small as the first weed, but its end is a withered world. *Mourns* and *wastes* are the same verbs as in [24:4](#). *Lebanon* can be taken as figuring the permanent, what has always been there; *Sharon* the beautiful; and *Bashan* and *Carmel* the fertile (cf. the restoration in [35:2](#)). *Withers* is found elsewhere only at [19:6](#), in a similar context. *KB* offers ‘to be infested with lice’ here, and we should think of a pest so virulent that even Lebanon falls before it.

10 Now (‘attâ), the emphatic particle of time, is used before three synonymous verbs. This creates a strong emphasis, first on the idea of exaltation, and secondly, on the fact that the crucial moment has arrived (cf. the threefold exaltation of [52:13](#)).⁵⁷

11–12 When the Lord rises to act three things happen simultaneously. First, there is the inevitable outcome of past decision and action. They have ‘conceived’ and now they must *give birth*. What an indictment of life without God—plans, no more than *chaff*, achievements, no more than *straw*! In the Assyrian crisis the chaff and straw represent people doing their utmost best, thinking their hardest, being their most realistic and practical, applying collective wisdom to the hard questions of life, but leaving God out ([29:15–16](#); [30:1–2](#); [31:1](#)). Secondly, sin boomerangs, so that the igniting agent is *your breath*/‘spirit’. Sinners are both the ultimate (*conceive*) and immediate (*fire*) cause of their own ruin. Thirdly, there is divine punitive action. Note the passive *be burned*, as if by an external agent. *Peoples* is as in verse 3. As if should be omitted and ‘in the fire’ added after *ablaze*. *Burned as if to lime* emphasizes intensity of heat; and ‘in the fire’ stresses the reality of the external agent. Thus, the outcome of sin is inevitable. The

⁵⁶ In Q^a, instead of ‘ārîm (‘cities’) we find ‘ēdîm (‘witnesses’). *BHS* tentatively adopts this reading, but surely it should be reckoned an error on the part of Q^a.

⁵⁷ The form ‘ērōmām (‘I will be exalted’) is the pausal form of ‘ērōmēm, which, in turn, is a compensated form for ‘etrōmēm ([GKC 54c](#)). The reason is probably poetic assonance.

tragedy of sin is that it ruins the life of the sinner; the danger of sin is that it excites the wrath of God.

**b. The first universal proclamation: the new Zion, its people and its king
(33:13–24)**

From the composite eschatological picture of verses 1–12 Isaiah selects one theme for further elucidation: the new Zion, which he began to describe in verses 5–6. There the emphasis fell on what the Lord will do for Zion in terms of righteousness, salvation and the fear of the Lord. Now we learn that within the city there are two components: the people and their king.

A¹ Zion's people (14–16)

a serious awareness of sin (14)

demand for holiness of life (15)

security and provision (16)

B¹ The presence of the king, the land possessed, all enemies gone (17–19)

C Zion at peace, in perpetual security (20)

B² The presence of the king, the Lord in power, absence of threat, victory for the helpless (21–23)

A¹ Zion's people, healed and forgiven (24)

Zion's people (33:13–16)

13 *Far away* and *near* are opposites expressing totality. The thought of a summons to the world is well-established in the cult (Pss. 47:1; 96:3, 10; 98:4). Behind it lies the assumption that what the Lord has done for his people has world-wide significance, both as a revelation of the Lord and as a message of salvation. Unless we hold that the proclamation is made to the world to taunt its people with a vision they can never attain, we must believe that the glories of Zion are being set forth in the belief (2:2–4) that in this way the nations will be magnetized to join the great pilgrimage (chapter 35) and to enter Zion on the conditions which this poem also implies. The essence of the proclamation is ‘the wonderful works of God’ (Acts 2:11), *what I have done. Power* (*g^ebūrâ*, ‘warrior power’; 30:15) is the Lord’s effective power over every foe. The first move of the people of God to the world is informative. The world is to be won by persuasion of the truth, to *acknowledge/“know” my power* (Jos. 2:9–11).

14 The people who live in this Zion have a terrifying awareness of the seriousness of sin and the impossibility that sinners can dwell in the presence of holiness. On *sinners* (*haṭṭā’im*) see **1:28** (cf. **30:1**). The *godless*/‘the profane’ (**9:17** <**16**> ; **10:6**; cf. **24:5**; **32:6**) are those who defame the divine nature and live accordingly. *Burning* is the same word translated ‘altar hearth’ in **Leviticus 6:9** <**2**> (cf. **Ps 102:3** <**4**>). As with *Ariel* (**29:1**), the reference is to the *fire* on the Lord’s altar, the fire which proclaims his holy presence in their midst. To *dwell* ($\sqrt{gûr}$) is ‘to reside as an alien’, a person without a natural right to be there. The fire of holiness is a threat to sinners (*consuming*) and an *everlasting*, changeless element in the divine nature.

15 This verse is an ‘entrance liturgy’ (cf. **Pss. 15**; **24**). The sequence of this poem is thoroughly biblical: before people can really hear the word of forgiveness (**24**) they must face the rigour of the demands of the divine law. This, and this only, is the person who can enter the new Zion and dwell in the presence of the holy fire. The verbs are singular throughout. The demand is individual and personal, seeking a comprehensive righteousness of life. *Walks* is a participle expressing unvarying conduct. *Righteously*/‘[in] righteousnesses’ is a plural of amplitude meaning full righteousness or righteousness in all its aspects, covering all conduct. Typically, purity (*is right*/‘straight’) of speech occupies the foreground (cf. **6:5**) but is followed a close second by financial probity and freedom from love of money (*rejects*/‘spurns’ is from $\sqrt{mâ'as}$; see **30:12**; **31:7**). *Gain from extortion* is plural, *i.e.* gain of any sort. *Keeps* is (lit.) ‘shakes’, suggesting that should any try to pass him a bribe they would find his hand trembling at the very idea and unable to hold the gift. (Cf. verse **9** where the verb $\sqrt{nâ'ar}$ describes trees shaking their leaves off.) The straightforwardness of what the godly person says is matched by the guardianship of his *ears*. *Against plots* is ‘from hearing of bloodguiltiness’; he will not even lend an ear to anything bringing guilt before God or hurt to other people. His desires (*eyes* are the organs of desire and intent) too are pure; his eyes are shut against *contemplating*/‘looking at’ *evil*, *i.e.* anything ‘bad’ (*ra'*, ‘vulgar, hurtful, perverted’; **45:7**).

16 To *dwell on the heights* is to be with the Lord (see verse **5**). *Refuge* is a noun from $\sqrt{sâ'gab}$, translated ‘exalted’ in verse **5**; hence the sense of high or top security. *Mountain fortress* is (lit.) ‘strong places of the cliffs’, *i.e.* at the top of inaccessible cliff faces. The Hebrew of verse **16cd** is ‘His bread—given; his waters—assured’. On the conditions laid down in verse **15**, the promises are thus made of fellowship with the Lord, security and

provision.

The presence of the king (33:17–24)

17 The verse begins, ‘The king in his beauty your eyes will behold’. To ‘see with the eyes’ is to see clearly and for oneself (Dt. 4:3). The identification of the king with the Lord awaits the parallel verses 21–22, but the preparation for that revelation begins here: the thought of fellowship with the Lord on the heights (16) is followed at once by direct vision of the king. The cognate verb of *beauty* is used of the ideal king of Psalm 45:2 <3> (‘excellent’), and the use of the word here indicates that the Messiah is intended. Indeed *king* lacks a definite article and is the idiom of indeterminateness for the sake of emphasis—‘a king—you know who!’. Here and in the parallel verses 21–23 the presence of the king is linked with *a land* enjoyed without fear (lit. ‘a land of far distances’), broad in extent, with freedom of movement within it and not a threat as far as the eye can see!

18–19 Gone alike are the experience of fear (18a), the victorious enemy (18b–d) and even the sound of alien speech (19). *In your thoughts/‘your heart’ you will will ponder the former terror* (*former* is an interpretative addition). *Terror* (‘ēmâ) is a strong word (Gn. 15:12; Jb. 41:6). The descriptions of the enemy officials (... who noted things down ... weighed things out ... noted down the towers ...) are vague, but 2 Kings 24 suggests that maybe one official listed those who were destined for captivity, another weighed and recorded the spoil and a third made an inventory of buildings for demolition. However, all is now in the past; the arrogant and their unintelligible talk are all gone. The reference to ‘speech too deep [possibly ‘guttural’] to understand ... staccato talk past comprehending’ recalls 28:11, 19. Such speech is a motif of divine chastisement and displeasure, and its disappearance signifies the restoration of divine favour.

20 This is the heart of the poem (see the outline on pp. 265f.). *Look upon* (v̄ hāzā) is used of ‘seeing the king’ in verse 17. Zion is first, a city of religious privilege and fellowship with the Lord (*our festivals/appointed feasts/assemblies*; cf. 1:14; 4:5); and secondly, one of peace and security of tenure (*peaceful*, ša^anān; cf. ‘undisturbed’ in 32:18). While *tent* symbolizes a return to the ‘ideal’ of Israel’s relationship with God in the desert (Je. 2:2–3), the fact that it will *not be moved* and *never be pulled up* signifies that pilgrimage is over. The tent ‘will not have to pack up; its pegs will not ever move on’. The latter verb (*nāsa'*) was regularly used of the desert itinerary. *Broken* (*nātaq*) means ‘torn in two’ and suggests hostile action but might also indicate fraying and

snapping—even the perishable will become durable.

21–23 These verses can be divided up as follows:

a¹ The presence of the Lord in power (21a)

b¹ Much water, absence of shipping (21b–d)

a² The presence of the Lord as king (22)

b² Inadequate shipping, abundant spoil (23)

In the parallel verse 17, Isaiah viewed the land; here he considers the sea. There he noted only the king's beauty; here we have a fuller description of his person and his functions. Verse 21 explains verse 20 with 'But on the contrary there ...'. Isaiah is still encouraging us to look at Zion (20), to see its religious assemblies and securities and to see the ground of these things in the presence of the Lord (21). *Will be our Mighty One* is (lit.) 'that mighty one [an attributive adjective; see on 53:11] will be on our side/will be ours'. *Mighty* ('addîr) means 'sovereign, dominant' (cf. Ps. 93:4). *Streams*/'niles' are abundant, unfailing waters (30:25; cf. on 7:3; 8:6; 22:9). Regarding *galley* ... *mighty ship*, the implication of the passage seems to require a reference to men-of-war (i.e. for all the abundant water there will be no ship-borne attack), but the wording is not explicit. It speaks of 'a ship with oars ... mighty vessel'. *Mighty* is 'addîr, used earlier in this verse of the Lord, but the thought is of strength (able to 'dominate' the seas) not of hostility. Is the idea then the absence of commercial shipping and, therefore, the self-sufficiency of the new Zion? This would suit the explanation offered in verse 22. We have the Lord and he is all-sufficient. He is both *judge* (supremely gifted in leadership and government; recalling Jdg. 2–16) and *lawgiver* (the day-to-day legislator and tribal chief; Jdg. 5:14; cf. Is. 10:1). As *king* he is continuous in office; the value sought in the initial request for a king, contrasting with the episodic rule of the judges (1 Sa. 12:10–12). To *save* was the function of the judge (Jdg. 2:16). The pronoun *he* in *he will save* is emphatic: our deliverance in every situation depends on him alone. This emphasis is elaborated in verse 23, continuing to use the imagery of shipping. As a 'ship of state' Zion is crippled—rigging loose, mast unstepped, sails (or 'flag') unhoisted—yet this limping hulk takes the spoil! The victory, then, has been won by another on its behalf. *Spoils* (cf. verse 4; 9:3 <2>) are the fruits of a conquest already past. *Then* is the emphatic particle of time. *Abundance* is preceded by an emphasizing pronoun '*ad*', meaning 'even/as much as spoil in abundance'.

24 Matching the voice of the law in verses [14–16](#), here is the comfort of the gospel. In Zion there will be neither sickness nor sin. It is possible to treat the reference to sickness (like the lameness of verse [23](#)) as figurative (*cf.* [53:4](#); [Ps. 107:17–20](#)). It is preferable, however, to hold sickness and *sins* in balance (the physical and the spiritual) as contrasting disabilities signifying the end of all disability. But in particular, (lit.) ‘the people living in it will be forgiven iniquity’/‘will be lifted up in respect of iniquity’. The idiom of ‘lifting up’ or ‘bearing iniquity’ is rooted in the sin-bearing doctrine of the Day of Atonement ([Lv. 16:21–22](#); *cf.* [Is. 53:4, 12](#)). On ‘iniquity’ (‘âwôn) see [1:4](#); [6:7](#).

c. The second universal proclamation: the final overthrow (34:1–17)

The opening section ([33:1–12](#)) of this final ‘woe’ acted as a preface, announcing the double theme of salvation and judgment. The salvation theme was developed further in the first universal proclamation ([33:13–24](#)). The second universal proclamation turns to the judgment theme. Central to the presentation is the use of Edom as typifying the Lord’s eschatological foe. In the parallel ‘woe’ ([29:15–24](#)) Isaiah reached back into the past, to Abraham and Jacob, for models of the eschatological fulfilment of divine promises. Here he looks to the past for the contrasting model of overthrow.

Edom first entered the traditions of the people of God in the person of Esau, and a strong seed of enmity was sown between himself and Jacob. Esau himself seems to have had little capacity for sustained animosity ([Gn. 33:4–16](#)), and the early narratives rather concentrate on how the antenatal prophecy will work out ([Gn. 25:23](#); *cf.* [Mal. 1:2–5](#)). It is not until [Numbers 20:14–21](#) that hostility becomes active and establishes the pattern of the future. Saul found it necessary to go to war with Edom ([1 Sa. 14:47](#)), and David went a step further ([2 Sa. 8:14](#); *cf.* [1 Ki. 11:15f.](#)) in conquest and annexation. This was the first and only conquest of Edom, with David the only king to keep this unruly foe in subjection. Solomon faced Edomite rebellion ([1 Ki. 11:1–17, 23–25](#)) and, a century later, so did Jehoram ([2 Ki. 8:20](#)). Within another fifty years ([2 Ki. 14:7, 10](#)) Amaziah was fighting an Edomite war. The hostility of Edom at Jerusalem’s fall (586 BC) is notorious ([Ps. 137:7](#); [Ob. 10–14](#)).

There is, then, nearly a millennium’s evidence to support Amos’s accusation of perpetual hostility ([1:11](#)), and there is no need to treat every reference to Edomite opposition as if it must post-date 586. Indeed, [Jeremiah 49:7–22](#) suggests that prior to Jerusalem’s fall the idea of judgment on Edom was part of the established prophetic

world-view. When Obadiah (in the passage without which we would lack material facts regarding the events of 586) turns from what Edom has done to the retribution it merits, he too slips naturally into the language of eschatology, making Edom central to the day of the Lord. This was no innovation on his part. Psalms 60:8 <10> and 83:6 <7> show that Edom had already a symbolic place in the theme of the hostile alliance against Zion. The former of these Psalms is specifically related to David in its title, and this affords a clue to the place of Edom in Old Testament thought. David, alone of the kings, conquered and held Edom and in this, as in so many other ways, became a Messianic pattern. Thus Ezekiel, foreseeing the coming David (Ezk. 34:23), moves at once to the overthrow of Edom (Ezk. 35:1–15) as part of the kingdom of the future. In this same tradition of using Edom as symbolic of the final hostile power stands the present passage in Isaiah (cf. 11:14; 63:1–6; Nu. 24:18). Recollecting 29:22 and the establishing of the family of Jacob, the overthrow of the people of Esau makes the end the exact fulfilment of what was promised at the beginning (Gn. 25:23). The purposes of God according to election stand.

The material in this section is in Isaiah's free-verse, rhythmic prose style and is in two sections. The conclusion of each section is marked by *for ever ... from generation to generation* (10bc, 17cd). In addition, the second section is defined by an inclusio, *possess* ($\sqrt{yāraš}$) ... *nest* ($\sqrt{\text{šākan}}$) in verse 11ab and *possess ... dwell* ($\sqrt{\text{šākan}}$) in verse 17cd. The four opening stanzas are a series of explanations. Each has an initial 'For' (2, 5, 6e, 8) and each announces its topic in matching words: the Lord 'has indignation' (2); '... has a sword' (6); ... has a sacrifice (6e); ... has a day of vengeance (8). The stanzas of the second section (11–13, 14–15) are differentiated by topic: the disappearance of humankind and the designation of the land for wild beasts, who then settle into secure habitation. The poem ends with imperatives calling for enquiry to show the certainty of it all in the plan of God.

A¹ Summons to the earth to hear (1)

B Final divine judgment (2–10c)

b¹ the Lord's anger: earth and heaven (2–4)

b² the Lord's sword: Edom (5–6d)

b³ the Lord's sacrifice: Edom (6e–7)

b⁴ the Lord's vengeance: Zion (8–10c)

C Perpetual desolation a certainty ([1od–17](#))

c¹ the end of humankind on earth ([1od–13](#))

c² the security of the beasts ([14–15](#))

A² Summons to note the sure plan of God ([16–17](#))

1 Similar calls to the whole world are familiar in the Psalms ([96:1–3; 97:1; 98:1, 2, 4ff.](#)). Knowledge of coming judgment is part of a divine package for the world, which includes first the knowledge of salvation that though the law of God stands ([33:14–16](#)) there is a forgiving mercy that triumphs over judgment ([33:24](#); cf. [Jas. 2:13](#)). Note the scope of the summons: *nations, peoples, earth, world* plus the qualifying phrases *all that is in it*/‘all that fills it’ and *all that comes out*.

2–4 Beginning on the widest canvas, Isaiah reveals the fall of earth ([2–3](#)) and heaven ([4](#)) through the onset of divine indignation. The death of people ([3ab](#)), the corruption of nature ([3c](#)) and the withering of the universe ([4de](#)) all together.

2 This is the first explanation (it begins with ‘For’) of the summons in verse [1](#). *The LORD is angry* is ‘the LORD has indignation’. On *angry* (*qeṣep̄*) see [54:8; 60:10](#); for the verb see [8:21; 47:6; 54:9; 57:16f.; 64:5](#) 〈[4](#)〉 , [9](#) 〈[8](#)〉 . *Wrath* (*ḥēmâ*), is the ‘heat’ or ‘severity’ of anger ([27:4; 42:25; 59:18](#)) while *qeṣep̄* may suggest its sudden explosion (cf. [54:8](#)). *Their armies*/‘all their host’ is their total population. *Totally destroy* and *give* are perfects of certainty, meaning ‘has decided to’ or ‘is determined to’. The former verb ($\sqrt{ḥāram}$) provides the name of the harem, the place of total segregation from the world. In judgmental contexts the verb implies the total removal of something from all further human contact ([11:15](#); cf. [Nu. 21:2; Jos. 2:10](#); on the noun *herem*, see verse [5](#); [Jos. 6:17–18](#)).

3 The reference to *bodies* and their corruption shows that sinners are finally implicated in the judgment due to their sin. Ultimately, the adage about hating the sin and loving the sinner breaks down. Sinners pay the price of their sin: the Lord exacts it. *Soaked*/‘melted’ refers to a novel and dreadful soil erosion, not by wind and water but by the torrential blood of the slain.

4 [24:21](#) and [27:1](#) have already alluded to the settling of accounts with heavenly powers. This may be in mind here, but only the fabric of the heavens is mentioned and the thought may be simply that the whole universe has been caught up in human corruption and will be subject to due judgment. *Stars*/‘host’ forms a neat verbal link with the judgment on earth in verse [2](#), and the fact that they are *dissolved*/‘decayed’, ‘rotted away’

shows that internal corruption will finally have its way. It is the Lord who determines when the story comes to an end and closes the book (*rolled up like a scroll*): the external factor of divine action. *Fall/‘fade’* signifies the completion of purpose: the harvest has been reaped. The universe is not eternal; internally, human sin has infected it with built-in obsolescence. Its pre-written history has an end; its span of life is only as long as the purpose planned for it.

5–6d Edom is introduced as a case in point and typical of the whole exercise of eschatological judgment. The *sword* is an instrument of person-to-person destruction, figuring the Lord’s direct action in judgment and the exaction of the individual penalty.

5 Stanza 2 is a further explanation of stanza 1 (it begins with ‘For’). Heaven and earth are again involved but in reverse order this time; the final battle starts in heaven and *descends ... on Edom*.⁵⁸ *People I have totally destroyed* is ‘upon the people of my doom’, ‘the people I have devoted to utter destruction’ (on *herem* see verse 2).

6 *The sword of the LORD is bathed in blood* is ‘The Lord has a sword; it is filled with blood’, and *covered with* is ‘enriched or nourished with’. In the sacrificial system, the *blood* and the *fat* were exclusively for God (Lv. 3:16, 17; 7:23–27). This is the point of the shift of metaphor here to the slaughter of animals: in judgment the Lord seeks what is peculiarly his, that to which he alone has a right.

6e–7 *Bozrah*, twenty-seven miles south of the Dead Sea, was Edom’s capital. The reference to *lambs etc* (6cd) is further explained in this third stanza by introducing the actual word *sacrifice*, that which is required if the demands of divine holiness are to be met. On *wild oxen* (*rē'ēmîm*) see Dhorme on Job 39:9, and on *bulls* and *great bulls* (*'abbîrîm*, ‘mighty ones’) see Judges 5:22; 1 Samuel 21:7 <8>; Psalm 22:12 <13>. Of these only *bulls* were used in the sacrifices. The reference to *wild oxen* implies that nothing will be spared. The use of ‘mighty ones’, which is not necessarily an animal word at all, may mean that thought has moved to the metaphor of mighty meaning important people (e.g. Ps 68:30).

8–10c *Vengeance* introduces another and final truth: what is required by divine holiness.

⁵⁸ *Has drunk its fill* is the piel from $\sqrt{rāwâ}$ (‘to be saturated’). Customarily, as the piel of a stative verb, this would have a transitive meaning (‘to saturate’) and *BHS* e.g. changes the vowels from piel to qal. But *GKC 52k* sensibly observes that the piel of a stative verb can also act as intensive of qal (51:13; Je. 51:56), and such a meaning is suitable here.

ness (*sacrifice*, verse 6e) is also merited by human sin. The idea of requital (*nāqām*) is characteristic of *Isaiah 56–66* (cf. 59:17; 61:2; 63:4) and is amplified by *retribution* (*šillûmîm*, ‘full settlement’). The further thought is added that the Lord is acting on behalf of his people. They have a *cause*, a lawful claim, against Edom and the Lord will see to a full settlement. In verses 9–10c, the overthrow of Sodom provides the imagery (Gn. 19), suitably to the thought of doing what people’s actions deserve. Also the blighted landscape shows again that the ultimate environmental threat is human sin, leaving in its wake a lasting pollution.

10d–13 The second half of the poem, beginning here, is linked to the first half by its opening word, ‘Unto perpetuity’ (*ever ... again*), which matches the opening words of the preceding lines (*for ever ... From generation to generation*). It is only the new topic—the disappearance of humankind, signalized by the advent of the beasts—which shows that it is a new beginning. The ordinary business of life (the person passing through) and the special duties of life (*nobles* and *princes*, verse 12) are alike things of the past, and in their place will come wild animals (11ab, 13cd) and weeds (13ab). The reason is that *God will stretch out over* it; it is an act of God. *Chaos* and *desolation* (the *tōhû* and *bōhû* of Gn. 1:2; cf. 24:10; Je. 4:23) speak of the meaninglessness, shapelessness, instability and emptiness of things before there was any ordering work of God. The *measuring line* pictures designation of land for ownership by marking it out in plots, and the *plumb-line* pictures assessing how something compares with the true and acting accordingly. This emptiness and meaninglessness comes about because it is deserved.

14–15 The topic of the incoming beasts is continuous with the preceding stanza but there is a new emphasis. The subsection is bracketed by references to animals and their mates (14b, 15cd), and the intermediate lines speak of *places of rest* (14d) and the raising of broods (15ab). The beasts have permanency and undisturbed security. With *wild goats* (*śā'îr*) there may be a hint here of the supposed ‘goat-demon’ (cf. 13:21), just as *night creatures* (*lîlît*) may hint at the ‘night-hag’. But this is by no means certain. Possibly it is simply a case of giving animals emotive names to increase the sense of frightful change and deterioration. Precise identification is impossible in the case of most of the animals in this passage.

16–17 The plural imperatives *Look*/‘search’ and *read* return to the pattern of verse 1ab. Those who were called to listen (1) to the awesome tale of coming judgment are

bidden to assure themselves of its certainty. This final stanza is linked to the immediately preceding stanzas. *Her mate* (16c) recalls the same words in verse 15d, and in verse 17 by measure is ‘by line’, the metaphor of verse 11. The sequence (lit.) *his* [‘my’] *mouth* ... *his Spirit* ... *his hand* (16de, 17b) guarantees the event by appeal to the stated will (*mouth*), divine power (*Spirit*) and direct personal agency (*hand*) of the Lord. But what is *the scroll of the LORD*? There is no other passage of Scripture to which appeal might be made in support of the details of this prediction. Calvin says the scroll is ‘the Law’ but fails to point to any passage in confirmation. Skinner says the words imply the existence of a prophetic canon, but the canon we possess offers no supportive references. The implication of the NIV’s rendering offers the best understanding even though it omits the connective particle *kî* after *read*. The search for confirmatory passages arises if we translate ‘read that ...’, i.e. Isaiah has forecast certain things about animals and other passages support what he says. But we can as easily translate it ‘read, because ...’, i.e. a summons to a searching knowledge of God’s word on the ground that every detail of it—even down to the birds of Edom—comes from his mouth and will be implemented by his Spirit and his hand. Such a truth comes naturally from Isaiah in the light of 8:16ff. (with its emphasis on possession and attention to the divine word as the hallmark of the remnant) and 29:11–12, 18 (with its ‘book’ metaphor of true spirituality). It is suitable to think that at least from 8:16 onwards Isaiah cultivated a ‘book religion’, keeping the mind freshly in touch with the things of God by searching in the Lord’s book (including his own deposited writings) as the true nourishment of spiritual conviction.

d. Coming home to Zion (35:1–10)

This is the visionary climax of the final ‘woe’ (chapters 33–35) and, in particular, the specific counterpart of the matching third ‘woe’ (29:15–24). The unobtrusive initial reference to redemption (29:22) becomes the pinnacle of the whole sequence (35:9–10). No diagram can do justice to the subtlety of composition of this truly delightful poem. The following bare outline offers only a basis for detailed comment:

A¹ Transformed natural creation greets ‘them’ (1–2b)

A² In a glorified world ‘they’ see the glory of the Lord (2c–f)

B¹ Call to fortitude: God is coming to save (3–4)

B² The sure and sustaining hope (5–6b)

B³ Explanation: waters of renewal (6c–7)

A³The safe highway prepared for ‘them’ (8)

A⁴‘They’ are the Lord’s redeemed, coming with joy to Zion (9–10)

Verse 6c resumes the ‘desert/wilderness’ theme of verse 1,⁵⁹ and in this sense the poem falls into two halves. In verses 1–6b there are those who need a stiffening of their resolve (3–4) and, typically of Isaiah, they are urged towards this by the sure hope set before them. In fact, they are bracketed around with this assurance (1–2, 5–6b). Hope is the cordial the people of God need to keep them going. In verses 6c–10 the pilgrims are assured of a safe road and a joyful arrival. On the other hand, however, verse 6c begins with ‘For’ (omitted by the NIV) and is thus an explanation of the promise of verse 5. In this sense the poem is a continuous whole, with the vision of renewed individuals (5–6b) at the centre of its trajectory, as above. This unitary shape of the poem is confirmed by an inclusio *be glad* ($\sqrt{sôš}$) in verse 1a and *gladness* ($sâsôn$) in verse 10d; by the linking note of ‘loud singing’ ($\sqrt{rânâ}$) at the beginning (2b, *shout for joy*), the mid-point (6b) and the end (10b, *singing*); and by the ‘them’/‘they’ theme, as in the outline above.⁶⁰ Each stanza of the poem is self-identified by vocabulary or topic. The stanzas group into pairs. In A¹ and A² the theme is of transformed nature and the unexplained references to *them* and *they*; in B¹ and B² it is bodily weaknessess (B¹) and personal disabilities (B²). B² and B³ describe effect and cause, a work of renewal embracing the human and natural creation; and finally, A³ and A⁴ focus on safe passage to Zion, contrasting *And ... will be there* ($w^e hâyâ šâm$) in verse 8a and *No ... will be there* ($lô' yihyeh$

⁵⁹ The NIV does us no service in its abandonment of the concordant principle of translation. It makes nonsense of poetical analysis to translate *midâ* respectively as *desert* and *wilderness* in verse 1 and respectively as *wilderness* and *desert* in verse 6. The same criticism applies to the translation of $\sqrt{rânâ}$ in this passage. It is *shout for joy* in verses 2 and 6 but *singing* in verse 10. The omission of ‘small’ (?) words like ‘Behold’ (4) and ‘For’ (6) is, unfortunately, par for the NIV course. So is the looseness which disguises the presence of two finite verbs in verse 4 by making the second an infinitive; this obscures the balance of lines 1–4 and 5–8 in the stanza.

⁶⁰ In verse 1 the NIV translates *be glad* instead of ‘be glad of/over them’ (see following note), and in verse 8 it translates *for those* instead of ‘for them’.

šām) in verse 9a.

1–2b The theme of this opening stanza is spontaneous transformation: words of growth and blossoming along with those of joy and song. Isaiah is living in exodus-terms. The people of God are a pilgrim-people. Once before the *desert* yielded water for their need ([Ex. 17](#)) and doubtless momentarily blossomed, but the day is coming when the final pilgrimage will be made through a transformed desert. The motif of a transformed world speaks as ever of the end of sin's reign and the reversal of the Lord's curse ([Gn. 3:17ff.](#)). *Be glad* should be 'be glad of them'.⁶¹ Who 'they' are is not yet stated. 'They' reappear in verses 2 and 8, and the denouement comes with the revelation of the Lord's *redeemed* in verses 9–10. To the prophet it seems as if the burgeoning wilderness, at long last released from bondage ([Rom 8:22f.](#)), is actually shouting its welcome, exulting (lit.) 'with exultation indeed and loud singing'.⁶²

2c–f A change of emphasis marks a new stanza. In the first stanza the desert rejoiced to display its new nature; in the second we learn that all this *glory* is a gift. The same words are used of the erstwhile desert and of the Lord (*glory, splendour*), suggesting that he has shared himself with his world and that nothing now hinders the full display of the glory of the Lord in the works of the Lord. The former desert will have the beauty of long-standing natural fertility (*Lebanon*), of ordered cultivation (*Carmel*) and of innate attractiveness (*Sharon*) (see [33:9](#)). But *they*, the unidentified human element in the renewed world, will be preoccupied with a different vision: the *glory* and *splendour* of the Lord. If these words are to be differentiated, *glory* (*kābōd*) is inherent value, weightiness of worth, and *splendour* (*hādār*; [2:10, 19, 21](#); [53:2](#)) is the outward token of majesty and dignity.

3–4 Imperatives without stated subjects (as in [40:1](#)) introduce this beautifully bal-

⁶¹ The verb 'be glad' has the suffix of the third person plural masculine pronoun *y^esusūm*. Since in English it is impossible for an intransitive verb to govern a direct object it is common to alter the MT, understanding the final *m* as dittographic of the initial *m* of the next word (*midbār*). It should not be overlooked, however, that Hebrew is more flexible in its use of intransitive verbs than English is and often does construe them with direct objects (e.g. [27:4](#); [35:9](#); [Jb. 31:18](#), [Zc. 7:5](#); see [GKC 117x](#)). 'Be glad over them' is correct linguistically and theologically; the liberation of creation being dependent on the revelation of the sons of God ([Rom. 8:22](#)).

⁶² On the form here of *gīlāt* ('exultation indeed!').

anced section consisting of two sets of four lines with, in each case, the fourth line consisting of two verbs: *Be strong, do not fear ... he will come to save you/he will himself come and he will save you*'. The first set has *Strengthen* and *Be strong* ($\sqrt{hāzaq}$) as its inclusio, and in the second set *your God* is balanced by an emphatic pronoun *he*. The implication of the stanza is that the people of God are still in the period of waiting and need encouraging in the realm of action (*hands*), stability (*knees*) and conviction (*hearts*). The proffered encouragement is the hope that is set before them: *your God will come*. It is a call to the fortitude of faith, not grim determination but believing determination. They already possess within themselves all they need to face the demands of the time; they are called not to receive a new blessing but to strengthen what is already theirs. Joshua's verbs ($\sqrt{hāzaq}$, 'to be strong' and $\sqrt{'āmaṣ}$, 'to be resolute'; Jos. 1:6) are apt. Isaiah's readers are encouraged to adopt Joshua, with the promised land before him, as a model. The word *fearful* means, on one side, impetuosity (see 32:4 on *rash*) and (4c), on the other (as here), panic. 'Behold' should be inserted before *your God*, and the *will come* (4c) should be removed. The first move of reassurance is simply to 'Behold your God', the God who is still prepared to be 'yours', notwithstanding all your weaknesses. The second move is to recognize that he will put everything right: *vengeance* (*nāqām*; see 34:8) for 'wrong suffered' (in this case, by his people) and *retribution* (*gēmūl*, 'requital') for 'wrong done' (here, to his people). Thirdly, he comes to effect salvation, full deliverance. Note the parallel phrases 'he will come with vengeance' (what he will do against his adversaries) and 'he will himself come and he will save you' (what he will do for his people).

5–6b This fourth (middle) stanza is marked by a double *Then*. The weaknesses of the present (3) will be gone and what is now hope (4) will be experience. Here is the Old Testament background to the New Testament doctrine of the redemption of the body. The contrast between two faculties of reception (*eyes* and *ears*) and two of action (leaping and singing) expresses totality.

6c–7 The initial 'For' should be restored. The implication is that the same new life which renews nature has flowed also into the Lord's people. The topic of abundant water (30:25; 33:21) unites this stanza. On its link with verse 1 see the introductory note and outline above. On the verb *bāqa'* (*gush*) cf. 48:21; Judges 15:19; Psalms 74:15; 78:15. Here Isaiah describes transformation (water *in the desert*); reversal (places that absorbed

moisture, *burning sand* and *thirsty ground*, now provide it in *pool* and *springs*); and restoration (*jackals*, so often the inhabitants of depopulated places,⁶³ are gone). *Burning sand* (*šārāb*) is found only at 49:10 (where it is translated ‘desert heat’; KB, ‘parching heat’). *Where jackals once lay ... is* (lit.) ‘in the home of jackals—its den!—grass as well as reeds and rushes!’, i.e. the reversal of a settled and inhospitable situation.

8 Through this attractive, nourishing landscape runs a highway. Where it goes we are not yet told, only who may go on it.⁶⁴ This stanza has attracted much imaginative alteration of the Hebrew text such as might be appropriate if we were dealing with sober prose, but there is in reality no literary licence here beyond what poetry permits. Though the form *maslûl* (*highway*) is not found elsewhere it has the same meaning as the more familiar *m̄esillâ* (a road built on a raised causeway and therefore visible and unmistakable). The MT reads ‘And there will be there a highway and a way’. The addition ‘and a way’ is not found in Q^a and could be a familiar word inserted to explain an unfamiliar one, but the duplication is not displeasing in such charged poetry. *It will be called the Way of Holiness*/‘The way of holiness shall be called to it’ is identical in form to ‘holy shall be said to him’ in 4:3.⁶⁵ The linguistic usage is as distinctively that of Isaiah as is the emphasis on holiness. *Unclean* is singular, meaning ‘any unclean person’. The word *tāmē* refers to impurities catered for in the sacrifices. Those disqualified from using the *highway* were, therefore, self-disqualified through failure to use the means of grace. By parity of reasoning those walking in holiness had availed themselves of the divine provision. See the outline and introductory comments above and translate *It will be for those* as ‘It will be for them’, and continue, ‘Whoever walks that Way—even simpletons could not/will not stray!’ On ‘them’ see verses 1a, 2e. We are about to learn who ‘they’ are but the secret is still kept! *Fools* (^ewîlîm; 19:11) are those who will always go wrong given half a chance, the ‘gormless’ who lack steady, guiding principles.

9–10 In contrast with the previous stanza (8) with its concentration on what is there, the final stanza opens with what is not: there is nothing to threaten. *Ferocious* (*parîṣ*,

⁶³ Cf. 13:21–22; 34:13; Je. 9:11–10; 10:22.

⁶⁴ The ‘pilgrimage to Zion’ theme is thoroughly Isaianic; cf. 2:2–4.

^aThe St Mark’s Isaiah Scroll from Qumran.

⁶⁵ For this use of the passive verb see 1:26; 19:18; 32:5; 54:5; 61:6; 62:4; with Pual instead of Niphal see 48:8; 58:12; 61:3; 62:2; and outside the Isaianic literature, Je. 7:32; Ho. 1:10–2:1>.

‘rapacious’) is used only here of beasts (cf. Ps 17:4; Je. 7:11). The *only* in *only the redeemed* is an interpretative addition. The two major verbs of ‘redeeming’ are here (on *ransomed* [pādā] see 1:27). *Redeemed* (v^{gāl}al), appearing here for the first of twenty-four times in Isaiah,⁶⁶ stresses the person of the redeemer, his relationship to the redeemed and his intervention on their behalf. The participle gō’ēl is the technical term for the next-of-kin who has the right to take his helpless relative’s needs as his own (Lv. 25:25; Nu. 5:8), and is often used of the ‘avenger’ of a murdered person. This is a good indication of the substitutionary nature of the relationship (the one being dead, the other taking over and acting; Nu. 35:12; Dt. 19:6). In its classical expression the work of ‘redeemer’ was a right which no other dare usurp (Ru. 3:12; 4:1–6). It was a right rather than an inescapable duty, calling for willingness. It speaks here, therefore, of the Lord as the only one who can redeem his people, identifying with them as their next-of-kin, willingly shouldering, on their helpless behalf and in their place, all and every one of their needs, paying their price (Lv. 27:13, 19, 31). Verse 10 is quoted at 51:11. *They will enter Zion* is ‘and they will come to Zion; travelling (8–9) gives way to arriving. *Singing/‘loud singing’/‘ringing cries’/‘shouts of joy’ (2b, 6b) will overtake them.* Oswalt calls attention to Psalm 23:6 and attractively sees the Lord’s people ‘being overwhelmed by gladness and joy’. The translation could equally be ‘they overtake gladness and joy’, as if what was always just ahead of them, is now at last caught and possessed. The departure of *sorrow and sighing*, the negative counterpart of the arrival of *joy*, secures an experience of unbroken and unbreakable happiness.

7. The rock of history (36:1–37:38)

Comparing this historical narrative with that in 2 Kings 18:13–19:37,⁶⁷ we find that Isaiah cuts into the story at the point where, having apparently accepted Hezekiah’s submission and agreed a monetary satisfaction (2 Ki. 18:13–16), the king of Assyria renewed his pressure on Jerusalem. This is the ‘treachery’ to which Isaiah has previously referred more than once (21:2; 24:16; 33:1). By doing this Isaiah brings the earthly king

⁶⁶ Cf. 35:9; 41:14; 43:1, 14; 44:6, 22–24; 47:4; 48:17, 20; 49:7, 26; 51:10; 52:3, 9; 54:5, 8; 59:20; 60:16; 62:12; 63:4, 9, 16.

⁶⁷ On the literary problems of the parallel between 2 Kings and Isaiah see the Additional note immediately below.

face to face with the Davidic king, and the scene is set for a key demonstration that the Lord rules the world, that he is steadfast in keeping his promises and that it is his purposes which are sovereignly accomplished. In this way chapters 36–37 put the rock of history under the fabric of eschatology. In chapters 6–12 Isaiah contended that divine grace would triumph in the coming of the divine Davidic king to the throne, not only of Judah but of the whole world. Chapters 13–27 explored this world panorama further, envisaging one Lord reigning as the one king over one world. Egypt and Assyria in particular were used (19:23ff.; 27:13) to typify the incoming of the nations into the single people of the Lord. Chapters 28–35 explored a limited tract of history in which Judah, Egypt and Assyria were embroiled, predicting that it would demonstrate the concrete reality of divine rule in the world and therefore validate all the foregoing promises. But up to now all was still prediction. Did it actually happen? Was there a demonstration of divine sovereignty? Is the Lord the king? Here is the attestation.

a. The first Assyrian embassy (36:1–37:7)

Sennacherib acceded in 705 BC and, after the manner of ancient conglomerate empires, was greeted by a crop of rebellions. His most pressing problem was Merodach-Baladan, who was not ousted from Babylon until 703. After that Sennacherib turned on his western rebels, among them Hezekiah of Judah (2 Ki. 18:7; cf. Is. 38:1). Sennacherib claimed that forty-six Judean cities fell to him and that their people were deported. Hezekiah made no showing at all and tried the power of gold where that of arms had failed (2 Ki. 18:13–16). Isaiah does not bother to record this. He is not concerned to trace the history of helplessness or the manoeuvring of faithlessness but to bring us to the point where he will demonstrate what faith can do and how realistic it is in the hard political crises of life.⁶⁸

⁶⁸ The reference to the *fourteenth year* of Hezekiah remains an unsolved problem. There can be no doubt that the year in question was 701 BC, but 715 as Hezekiah's accession date conflicts with the information given in 2 Ki. 18:1, 9, which requires an accession about 729/8. Two suggestions predominate in a veritable blizzard of theories. The first is that instead of *fourteenth* we should read 'twenty-fourth', involving a very minor adjustment of the Hebrew text from 'arba' 'eśrēh to 'arba' 'aśerîm. (See H. H. Rowley's comprehensive review and decision in favour of this course in his essay 'Hezekiah's reform and rebellion', *Men of God*, ed. H. H. Rowley (Nelson, 1963), pp. 98ff.;

The Rabshakeh's first speech: no salvation in faith! (36:1–10)

2 *Field commander*/‘Rabshakeh’ was possibly the ‘chief cup-bearer’, but the title seems to have lost touch with any such original office and become the designation of some high official in the royal service. At *Lachish*, thirty miles southwest of Jerusalem, Bright records that a pit was found with the remains of about fifteen hundred people, casualties of Sennacherib’s campaign.⁶⁹ By the time he besieged Lachish, Sennacherib had disposed of the Tyrian and Philistine rebels and had defeated Egypt’s army at Eltekeh (in Philistia, north of Lachish) on its one and only attempt to redeem its promises to the Palestinian states. Hezekiah was isolated and, politically speaking, it is no wonder that Sennacherib pocketed the Judahite tribute while at the same time determining to leave no rebels behind when he returned home. It was at *the aqueduct of the Upper Pool* that Isaiah himself had stood to call Ahaz to a position of trust and had been refused (see 7:3; 22:9–11). In the person of the Rabshakeh the harvest of unbelief is being brought home.

4–10 The Rabshakeh’s clever speech develops four themes: reliance on Egypt is a no-hope position (4–7); trust in the Lord as a solution is ruled out because the Lord has

also Oswalt and Young.) In order to get the sums approximately right this theory requires us to understand that it was in Hezekiah’s fourteenth year that he raised the standard of revolt against Assyria and that a few years elapsed before Sennacherib took action. As Rowley points out, a Palestinian revolt, to have any chance of success, must have taken place while Sennacherib still had his hands full in Mesopotamia. It is, therefore, sensible to assume a gap between rebellion and counteraction. Well and Good, but both **2 Ki. 18:13** and **Is. 36:1** say that the fourteenth year was the year when Sennacherib arrived on the scene. The other view has the merit of explaining the facts we know but is obliged to do so by theorizing in areas where facts are not available to us. It does seem to be the case that the Davidic kings were accustomed to take their chosen successors into co-regency so as to secure easy transmission of the crown. The principle of primogeniture was never adopted, and David in his day was expected to name his successor (**1 Ki. 1:5–30**). On the assumption that Jotham, Ahaz, Hezekiah and Manasseh all had periods of co-regency with their predecessors as well as sole reigns, the available dates can be harmonized. In this case, Hezekiah is assumed to be co-regent with Ahaz from 729–715 and sole king from 715–696 when he took Manasseh in a co-regency lasting until 687. See K. A. Kitchen and T. C. Mitchell, ‘Chronology (Old Testament)’ in *IBD*.

⁶⁹ J. Bright, *A History of Israel* (SCM, 1960), p. 269.

been alienated by the reduction of his places of worship ([7](#); [2 Ki. 18:4](#)); even if Hezekiah had armaments as a gift he has not got the manpower ([8–9](#)); and Assyria has divine authority for its attack ([10](#)).

4 *The great king* is the title the Assyrian kings arrogantly claimed (see [10:8](#); [30:33](#)). *This confidence* refers to the confidence that made Hezekiah bold enough to raise the standard of rebellion.

5 *You say* ('āmartā) is the reading of [Q^a](#) and of [2 Kings 18:20](#); the [MT](#) reads 'I say the strategy and military strength are only empty words.' The Rabshakeh scornfully dismisses Hezekiah's 'confidence' by saying it is backed neither by sound wisdom (the *strategy* which has been evolved) nor force of arms (*g^ebûrâ*; see on [30:15](#)). *Empty words/a word of lips*' refers to the power to move the lips but no more! Isaiah had threatened that if they refused to hear him they would hear the message from foreigners ([28:9–11](#)), and here are his very words: confidence, rely, trust and power.

6 The Rabshakeh had already seen the defeat of *Egypt* at Eltekeh. Like Hezekiah he knew there was no help to be expected from that quarter, but the Rabshakeh was more worldly wise than Hezekiah's politicians. He knew that Egypt was a positive danger to anyone who relied on it—confirming Isaiah's estimate that to ally with Egypt is to ally with death ([28:15](#)).

7 Hezekiah had conducted a centralizing reform of religion ([2 Ki. 18:1–7](#); [2 Ch. 29–31](#)) with the closure of local sanctuaries and their (at best) corrupt Yahwism. The Rabshakeh speaks from his own heathen background where reduction in quantity of worship detracted from a god's glory, but he may have been playing also on the frayed nerves of any who were less than convinced of the rightness of what the king was doing.

8 The [MT](#), in so far as it can be represented, has 'my master, the king (Assyria)' here. It looks like a text into which, for the benefit of later readers, an explanatory word has been injected. [2 Kings 18:23](#) has the full form 'my master, the king of Assyria'. *Horses* were perennially in short supply in Israel (cf. [30:16](#); [31:1](#), [3](#); [36:8](#); [Dt. 17:16](#); [1 Ki. 10:28](#)).

10 Behind this claim there no doubt lies some knowledge of what Isaiah had been saying (e.g. [10:5–6](#)). Spies are not a modern invention, and the Rabshakeh knew enough to make a plausible perversion of the word of God. *To ... destroy this land* is 'to destroy this place' in [2 Kings 18:25](#). This is one of the differences between the two accounts that

^aThe St Mark's Isaiah Scroll from Qumran.

is inexplicable if some Isaiah-editor depended on Kings. Isaiah's deeply-felt Zion theology would never have permitted 'place' to be changed to 'land'.

The Rabshakeh's second speech: popular appeal—'Make peace' (36:11–21)

Arrogantly going over the heads of the king's officials (11), the Rabshakeh addresses the people directly, brutally reminding them that politicians make wars but people suffer them (12). But it is the same arrogant spirit which is now about to betray him into a fatal step. It is one thing—a fair diplomatic ploy—to advise against trusting either Hezekiah or the Lord (14–15); it is even humanitarian to offer peace and a new home instead of the horrors of siege (16–17); but to equate the Lord with the gods of the nations (18–20) and to scorn his ability to save Jerusalem is quite different (*cf.* 37:4, 6, 15–19).

11 Aramaic was the diplomatic language of the day and would enable negotiations to be carried out with a degree of secrecy. For the Rabshakeh to depart from diplomatic protocol by using 'Hebrew' flaunts his cosmopolitan culture and hints that one could not expect ignoramuses in this remote spot to know what's what in the real world! This arrogance will soon be his ruin.

12 The Rabshakeh reminds the gathered populace (*the men sitting on the wall*/‘the inhabitants, on the wall’) of the hard facts of siege warfare. We can imagine him gesturing with his arms to the Jerusalemites crowding the broad wall. *Like you* should be ‘with you’; they are doomed by their (to him) insane attachment to Hezekiah and his advisers. Astutely he attempts in one sentence to scare the people and alienate them from their leaders.

13–17 The Rabshakeh was seemingly well informed about Isaiah's ministry with its emphasis on the way of faith, else why should denial of trust in the Lord as a solution figure so plainly in his presentation. *Trust* (15) is the very vocabulary of Isaiah (30:15) and *deliver*, the word of promise spoken to Hezekiah at a most sensitive time and confirmed by signs following (38:6ff.). Did the Rabshakeh at all fear that if they pursued the way of faith the Lord would prove as good as his word? Hardly. It is more likely that he was simply pressing for a quick solution. 37:9 indicates that Sennacherib was unwilling to be drawn into a war in western Palestine, possibly aware that his position at home was not yet totally secure. Thus he makes his offer in the most generous and attractive terms: an unmolested present (16) and an agreeable future (17). He is too shrewd to try to hide the well-known Assyrian policy of deportation, but he tries to sweeten the pill.

18–21 This was the fatal error; the word of blasphemy the Lord heard ([37:7](#)). For Assyria's pride see [10:7–14](#). On *Hamath* etc. see [10:9](#). *Sepharvaim* is of uncertain location. *Have they rescued Samaria?* BHS etc. would insert a question to make the text here match the foregoing ‘Where are the gods of the land of Samaria?’, but as the MT stands it has wonderful sarcastic force: ‘Oh sure! They did deliver Samaria from my hand!’ He may be picking up hints of a complacent spirit in Jerusalem in respect of the fall of Samaria twenty years previously. Did they say, ‘No wonder they fell! All those imported gods!’ And the Lord is no different? We shall see!

The king's reaction: faith at last ([36:22–37:7](#))

Word is brought to the king, who immediately reacts with penitence and seeking the Lord ([37:1](#)). Out of this arose a deputation to Isaiah ([2](#)), eating humble pie indeed ([3](#)), noting the element of blasphemy in the Rabshakeh's words ([4](#)) and requesting prayer. But Isaiah does not need to make any fresh approach to the Lord: what he has once said stands ([5–6](#)). The Lord will act to remove the threat ([7](#))—and the threatener!

37:1–2 What transpired on this visit to the Lord's house we are not told. The subsequent words ([3](#)) indicate that the torn *clothes* and *sackcloth* were much more than formal expressions of distress and penitence. At last Hezekiah realized that the Lord was his only resource and at once turned to him. The *temple*/‘house’ is where the Lord lived in the midst of his people. *Leading priests* is ‘elders of the priests’.

3–4 Now there is repentance and confession: the end of human strength. *Distress* expresses the fact of adversity, *rebuke* its nature as merited trouble, *disgrace*/‘contumely’ the scorn attracted and *children* etc. the disappointment of hopes. It speaks volumes for the reality of Hezekiah's sense of sin that he bases no appeal on his own needs but only on the possibility that the Lord will stand by his own honour. In his prayer the king makes no reference to himself but recognizes that the needs of the Lord's people are always a valid ground of appeal to the Lord. The reference to *the remnant* ‘that happens to be here’ is touching. All round Jerusalem there is a veritable multitude of Hezekiah's people, already enslaved to Assyria as really as if he had sold them himself. Such is the power of a ruler and such the outcome when armaments are trusted and prayer scouted.

5 Kaiser's quibble that ‘the carrying out of their task is described in verses [3–4](#) before the announcement in verse [5](#) that they have reached the prophet’ is typical of that element of being hard to please which finds faults where none exist. The conjunction ‘and’

which opens verse 6 can well be understood retrospectively: ‘Thus they came ... and Isaiah said ...’.

6–7 They asked Isaiah to pray, but he did not do so. There is no hesitation, no turning to God, no waiting on him but only a simple belief that what the Lord once said he meant. An initial message of reassurance (6) leads to a promise of divine action (7). *Underlings* is a ‘diminishing’ word ‘the king of Assyria’s lads’—the Tartan, the Rabsaris and the Rabshakeh. (2 Ki. 18:17). It provides a welcome piece of light relief! *Listen* is ‘Look’ or ‘Behold’. On *a spirit* see 19:14; 29:10; 1 Kings 22:21–23; 2 Thessalonians 2:11; Revelation 17:17. The ‘Lord of hosts’ (see 1:9) possesses every potentiality and power to deal with every situation. Those who merit delusion are visited with error. So that when is (lit.) ‘and he will hear a message and will return ...’. *Have him cut down* is ‘I will make him fall’ (*there* should be omitted). Isaiah makes no reference to the devastation of the Assyrian army by the angel of the Lord (37:36). He had already predicted this (14:24–27; cf. 31:8) in the first of the interim fulfilments within chapters 13–27; here he goes straight to the judgment which will fall on the blasphemer himself. If only Hezekiah had believed the word when it was first spoken!

b. The second Assyrian embassy (37:8–35)

Assyria leaves Judah (37:8–9a)

We are not told what Hezekiah replied to the Rabshakeh (but see on verses 9b–13). In any case, the Assyrian dignitary and his ‘large army’ (36:2) withdrew from the city and rejoined the main force attempting to reduce Linnah, ten miles north of Lachish. It is best to understand verse 9 as explaining the move to Libnah: ‘He had heard about Tirhakah ...’.⁷⁰ The move north indicates Sennacherib’s unwillingness at this point to face a prolonged Palestinian war. He had by no means finally dealt with the Babylonian

⁷⁰ It used to be alleged that since Tirhakah was only six years old at this time, this reference must be grossly unchronological. It is now known, however, that he was a young man of twenty or so in 701 BC. See K. A. Kitchen, *The Third Intermediate Period in Egypt* (Warminster, 1973), pp. 154ff., 387ff.; *Ancient Orient and Old Testament* (Tyndale Press, 1966), pp. 82ff. He may have been accorded the title of king proleptically, since he did not accede to Egypt’s throne until 690. Kitchen notes that ‘it is a common practice of oriental writers to refer to people ... by titles and names acquired later than the period being described.’

threat to his empire and felt it necessary, therefore, to curtail his western objectives which had included the conquest of Egypt.⁷¹ The likelihood of further Egyptian incursion following the defeat at Eltekeh was remote but, as we know, the rumour was divinely inspired. The Lord of history knows when a whispered word is enough and ‘the hearts of kings are in his rule and governance’.⁷²

The letter to Hezekiah: the man of faith (37:9b–13)

This is the first of three sections dealing with the second Assyrian approach to Jerusalem. It is important because it reveals basic changes in Hezekiah from the situation in 36:1–37:7. Reading between the lines of the Assyrian letter we see how Hezekiah had replied to the Rabshakeh’s first speech and what sort of person he now is. There had been a time (36:6–7) when Hezekiah was both trusting the Lord and keeping his powder dry—rather vice versa, for his primary reliance was on Egyptian armament. But now there is no reference to Egypt, only to ‘your god on whom you are trusting’ (10). In 36:14 Hezekiah was branded as a would-be deceiver of his people, using faith as a pawn in political survival; now (10) there is no reference to deception on Hezekiah’s part. It is the Lord who will let them down! Hezekiah has come to a straightforward, personal and unequivocal faith.

Sennacherib apparently addressed Hezekiah in verbal (10) and written (14) form; attacking the folly of his new-found position of faith (10b); asserting the invincibility of Assyria over both nations (11) and gods (12); and stressing the risk particularly to kings who oppose Assyria (13). Note the present tense of *depend*/‘you are relying’ (10). Hezekiah’s unrecorded reply must have been unequivocal on the matter of faith, that *Jerusalem will not be handed over to the king of Assyria*, and he must also have alluded to the promise of 38:6. The resultant picture of a man simply relying on the word of divine promise is compelling. The word $\sqrt{hāram}$, *destroying them utterly* (11; cf. 34:2, 5), is used of removing from all human contact and designating something as the possession of God. Thus the ensuing contest becomes a contest between the Lord and the god(s) of Assyria. Sennacherib has consigned other cities to his god; can the city of the Lord thus become a devoted thing? *Gozan etc.* are all in the upper Euphrates area. In verse 13 Sen-

⁷¹ Bright, *History*, p. 270.

⁷² The Collect for the Queen in the Book of Common Prayer Communion Service.

nacherib introduces a new element in the confrontation. He tries to play on Hezekiah's instinct for survival as *king*, but actually he is testing the man of faith in yet another direction. As the Davidic king, Hezekiah is the inheritor of promises. Will he now trust the promises for himself in the face of the Assyrian might? *Hena* and *Ivvah* are unknown places.

Hezekiah's reaction: the man of prayer (37:14–20)

Contrast this with 37:1–2, where Hezekiah rent his own clothes and asked Isaiah to pray. Now there is no rending of garments and he does his own praying. Here is a man who knows his way about in the realm of faith. Therefore, he begins by committing all to God (14) and then turns to asking (15–20).

14 How nonplussed the Assyrians must have been by the reaction of a man who keeps them standing while he reads their letter and then calmly goes to cast his burden on the Lord! ‘What did he say?’, Sennacherib will presently ask, and they will stammer, ‘Well ... nothing!’ Truly he who believes does not panic (28:16).

15–20 Like all true prayer, Hezekiah's is preoccupied with God: who he is (16); his honour (17); his uniqueness (18–19); and the revelation of his glory to the world (20).

16 The heart of prayer is not its petitionary content but the acknowledgment of God.

A¹ *LORD Almighty*/‘of hosts’: the Lord in his personal omnipotence

B¹ *God of Israel*: his chosen link with his people

C *Enthroned between the cherubim*: sovereignty, personal presence, availability

B² *God over all*: his sway over all the earth

A² *You have made heaven and earth*: omnipotence of government as Creator

The cherubim were the figures set at each end of the mercy seat, gazing inwards and downwards (Ex. 37:6–9). They formed the pedestal of the invisible throne of the God of Israel (Ezk. 1:22–28). Thus his feet rest on the mercy seat (Pss. 99:1–5; 132:7). The cherubim, as Ezekiel saw them, represent all created excellence (the lion represents wild beasts; the ox, domestic beasts; the eagle, birds; and man, the greatest of all creatures). Thus enthroned over all, the Lord was nevertheless present at the centre of his people's life. The Old Testament doctrine of God the Creator is fourfold. The God who *made* all, preserves all in being, controls all in operation and guides all to their appointed destiny. The appeal to the Creator in prayer is, therefore, not a simple appeal to greatness or to

abstract power but specifically to the God who actually rules and determines all.

17 *The living God* is ‘a living God’ with indefiniteness for the sake of emphasis (*cf.* 31:8). Here, the Lord is set apart as in a different category from all other claimants to deity (*cf.* Heb. 1:2, ‘a Son!’).

18 With *all these peoples and their lands* (lit. ‘all the lands and their land’) the NIV follows 2 Kings 19:17. Q^a omits ‘and their land’.

19 Heathen worshippers would have looked beyond the cult object to the god as a spiritual force represented by it, but Hezekiah speaks for the Old Testament when he identifies the god with the idol. Old Testament monotheism was so rigorous that it equated god with symbol and refused to see any reality behind or beyond (*cf.* on 41:5–7).

20 *You alone, O LORD, are God* is simply, ‘You alone are Yahweh’. Just as Hezekiah identifies the heathen god with its idol, so in reverse he makes the name of his God, Yahweh, the equivalent to the noun ‘God’: to say Yahweh is to say God. The NIV here follows Kings and Q^a, but mistakenly.

Isaiah’s spontaneous message to Hezekiah: the man of the word of God (37:21–35)

In 37:6 Hezekiah received a word of the Lord in response to his approach to the prophet for prayer. Here he receives a word without any seeking on his part. His adoption of the way of faith opens the door whereby he speaks to God (14–20) and God speaks to him (21–35). These two things are causally connected: *Because you have prayed ... this is the word ...* (21–22). The oracle which follows (22–35) announces the settlement of the whole problem. Thus, the way of believing prayer is the truly practical way of dealing with the harsh realities of this world. What neither armaments (36:9) nor diplomacy (30:1–2) nor money (2 Ki. 18:13–14) could achieve, prayer has done. But what the Lord is about to do he has planned of old (26–29). Here is a mystery of prayer: it is a means by which the Lord brings eternal counsels to pass (*cf.* the prediction of Mal. 3:1a with the answered prayer of Lk. 1:13, 17). The Lord performs foreordained purposes in answer to prayer. The message which Isaiah sent to Hezekiah has a delightful ‘spur-of-the-moment’ spontaneity about it. It has all the marks of Isaiah’s word mastery but perhaps lacks the polish of a more finished product. But what an impact it makes in context!

A¹ Fact: prayer answered in the departure of Assyria (22)

^aThe St Mark’s Isaiah Scroll from Qumran.

B¹ The Sovereign defied (23–25)

B² The Sovereign in action (26–29)

B³ Sovereign faithfulness (30–32)

A² Explanation: the Lord's defence of the city (33–35)

The oracle is in two main sections, dividing at verse 30 where Isaiah turns from focusing on Assyria to address Hezekiah. This division is marked by the identity of thought and similarity of wording of verses 29ef and 34 at the end of each section. A¹ and A² are linked as addresses to the king of Assyria: *This is the word ... against him* (22); and ... *concerning the king ...* (33). They are also linked by the contrast between the king who is departing (22) and the king who will not enter (33–35). The B sections are bracketed by two references to divine sovereignty: *the Holy One of Israel* ... ‘the Lord’ (^a*dōnāy*; 23); and the *LORD Almighty* (‘Yahweh of hosts’; 32c). B¹ and B² tellingly contrast the first person singular of the pretender-sovereignty of the king and the first person singular of the actual sovereignty of the Lord.

21–22 The prayer-answering God. Just as Hezekiah’s prayer was ‘all about God’ (16–20), so is Isaiah’s reply. 2 Kings 19:20 concludes with ‘I have heard’, which BHS would introduce here at the end of verse 21. The text as we have it is, however, more Isaianically forceful in its link between man at prayer and the word of God in reply, a clearer expression of the link between faith and practical politics which Isaiah has been insisting on. *Virgin* is used here in the sense of being untouched by the marauder. *Mocks* (✓*lā`ag*) is a neat reversal of its threatening use in 28:11 (‘foreign’). *As you flee* is ‘after you’, i.e. ‘as she watches you go’.

23–25 The holy Sovereign. We have here the accusation of blasphemy (23) and the proof of it: that Assyria has been planning as if omnipotent (24–25). In verses 24e and 25a *I* is emphatic, having the sense, ‘I myself’. On *insulted* see verse 17. On *blasphemed* cf. Numbers 15:30, where ‘to blaspheme’ is parallel to ‘to sin defiantly’ (lit.) ‘high-handedly’. *Raised* and *lifted* are the verbs used in 6:1 of the Holy One. Blasphemy is a human being acting as if he were God. Isaiah is living within his own experience. What he discovered (6:1ff.) of awesome, holy omnipotence clarifies his sense of Assyria’s offence: its confidence in its own power (*my many chariots*), author of its own success, master of its own future. *I have cut* is ‘that I might cut’. The king sees himself as the arbiter of his own plans and, figuring his opponents as natural hazards, no height, no impenetrable

jungle barrier could hinder him. On *I have dug* the MT is simpler than the NIV, describing how the king has always ‘had the technology’ to provide for himself: ‘For my part, I have dug and drunk water’. *I have dried* would be better ‘that I might dry’ or ‘purposing as I did to dry’. The king’s past successes emboldened him to see even Egypt as his prey—a task as easy as that of the Egyptian farmer who closes the small irrigation channels which water his fields by heaping up soil with his foot. The king’s foot is equal to blocking even the Nile itself!

26–29 The executive Sovereign. Divine sovereignty is absolute. *Ordained* is (lit.) ‘did’: it was so settled in the divine plan that it could be spoken of as accomplished. *Planned* is ‘moulded’ as a potter does (*cf.* 27:11) and *brought it to pass* means did exactly what was arranged so long before. Divine sovereignty is also executive (26e–27; 29cd; the hard facts of human history are the plan of God; 45:7; Am. 3:4–7; 4:6–11); moral (28–29b; Assyria receives what it deserves; see 10:5–15); and mysterious (29cd; because while not limited by human responsible will and deed, it takes account of them). All the energy, even violence, belongs to the horse; all the direction, wisdom, guiding touch belongs to the rider. So Assyrian arrogance, brute force, imperialistic ambition etc. are real, morally responsible and culpable, but they are under divine direction in their outworking (54:16f.). The threefold simile of verse 27 exposes how the Assyrians thought of the world and its peoples: they exist for their benefit (*plants in the field*); they are totally incapable of offering resistance (*tender green shoots*); and are transient, insubstantial, of no ultimate significance (*like grass sprouting on the roof*).⁷³ *Insolence* (29) is rather ‘bland assurance’ or ‘complacency’ (as at 32:9). *My hook in your nose* is cruelly apt; according to their monuments, Assyrians led prisoners in this way. Assyria (29ef) came on the Lord’s errand (10:5ff.) and is hemmed in to that one road. Divine sovereignty (*cf.* verses 26–27) goes beyond the broad sweep of history to its small print.

30–32 The faithful Sovereign. Lest anyone should think that the Assyrian withdrawal was no more than a happy chance, Isaiah adds a *sign* (*cf.* 7:14; 38:7; Ex. 3:12). For two years normal agriculture would be impossible, yet the land would of itself produce enough for the people until *in the third year* tillage could be resumed.

30 On *grows by itself* (*sāpîah*) see Leviticus 25:5, 11. *What springs* (*šāhîs*) is found only

⁷³ For *scorched* the MT reads *š̄ēdîm* (‘blighted before the east wind’). This is suitable but a shade too easy!

here ([2 Ki. 19:29](#), *sāhîš*), seemingly with the meaning of self-set seed *etc.* The invasion prevented sowing in 702, yet when the threat lifted in 701 they would find sufficient self-sown crops. The ensuing situation with the Assyrians still present though evacuating would make agriculture impossible, yet again 700 would bring in enough through ‘chance growth’. Thus the Lord would confirm retrospectively that it was his hand that dispersed the threat. Viticulture required years of patient work in the *vineyards* before a vintage could be reaped ([5:2](#); [7:25](#); [Dt. 20:6](#); [Lv. 19:23–25](#)). Zechariah [8:12](#) calls the vine (lit.) ‘the seed of peace’, *i.e.* it is a plant that requires peaceful conditions in which to ‘yield its fruit’.

31 What happens for the land is figurative of what will happen for the people, who will enter a period of security (*take root*) and prosperity (*bear fruit*). How gracious is the moral sovereignty of the Lord! Isaiah knew that the nation was doomed even before Assyria attacked ([22:14](#); [31:6](#)), passing the ‘point of no return’ envisaged in [6:9f](#). Yet, however belatedly, Hezekiah had embraced the way of faith and this would not go unrewarded (*cf.* [1 Ki. 21:27ff.](#)).

32 The word *remnant* always has far-reaching resonances, looking beyond immediate experiences to the fact that the Lord will always preserve a people for himself—a policy his *zeal ... will accomplish* (*cf.* [9:7](#) [9:6](#)) through his sovereign power as *the LORD Almighty*.

33–35 The preserving God. The king will neither approach (to *enter* is ‘to come to’), nor threaten, either from a distance (*shoot an arrow*) or at close quarters (*with shield, build a siege ramp*), but he will go exactly as he came. He is under the Lord’s control, and the city is under the Lord’s care. *Defend* ($\sqrt{gānan}$, as [31:5](#); [38:6](#)) means ‘to surround’ (as a garden with a protective wall). Thus, what the parallel section ([21–22](#)) represents as an answer to prayer is here a divine decision based on motives interior to the divine nature (*for my sake*) and long-standing covenantal undertakings (*for the sake of David*).

c. The finale: Assyrian overthrow ([37:36–38](#))

Isaiah foretold the breaking of Assyrian power in the hills of Judah ([14:24–27](#)), but he never predicted what actually happened as recorded here. The prophets generally expected to be ‘in the know’ ([Am. 3:7](#)), but it was not always the case ([2 Ki. 4:27](#)). Information from outside the Bible is equally sparse for it was not the Assyrian way to record disaster. We do not even know for certain whether Sennacherib was moving north from

Libnah to avoid entanglement with (as he thought) advancing Egyptians or intending to have a show-down with the now resolute Hezekiah. We know only that a divine act of massive proportions settled the issue and provided the crowning demonstration of Isaiah's contention that the Lord is master of world history.

36 Instead of *the angel of the LORD* it would be more consonant with Old Testament theology to print 'the Angel of the LORD'—that Old Testament personage who is both the Lord and distinct from the Lord (e.g. Gn. 16:7, 11; Jdg. 13:21f.) and who combines in himself divine holiness and divine condescension (Ex. 23:20–23).⁷⁴ Thus Isaiah brings together in this incident five major divine manifestations: the word (31:2), the Spirit (37:7), the hand (31:3), the arm (30:30) and the angel. The Lord is indeed 'LORD of hosts'.

37–38 Sennacherib reigned for another twenty years and engaged in further military exploits, but never again in Palestine; that road was closed to him. He was assassinated in 681, and it is possible that Isaiah lived to see this final stroke and to note the contrast between the living God who hears the prayer of his king and in whose house the king first began to find his true security and a god of wood and stone in whose very house his king was struck down! To the last the Lord reigns. The names *Nisroch*, *Adrammelech* and *Sharezer* are not found outside the Bible, but the Babylonian Chronicle records the assassination of Sennacherib and Esarhaddon's accession.

Additional note. The relationship of 2 Kings 18:13–20:21 to Isaiah 36–39

It has long been the majority view that these chapters have been taken into Isaiah from the book of Kings, and it remains so today. Oswalt and Young are among the few who take the opposite view. Wilderberger, with a great deal of reason, contends that neither stemmed from the other but that both used common sources. There are certainly difficulties in the way of assuming that the chapters were edited into the Isaianic literature from Kings.

2 Kings 18:13 onwards is unique in Kings. No other canonical prophet is named (save Jonah; 2 Ki. 14:25) and no other passage quotes a full-length oracle. Compare e.g. the total absence of Jeremiah and his ministry from 2 Kings 22–25. It cannot, therefore, be simply stated that the historian behind Kings wrote this account and that it was subsequently drafted into Isaiah with some alterations. Its presence in Kings would first need

⁷⁴ On the 'angel of the LORD', see J. A. Motyer, *NBC*, p. 29.

explanation. The nearest comparable material in Kings is the Elijah-Elisha cycle, and it is generally urged that this had an independent redactional history before coming into the Kings corpus.⁷⁵

It is particularly important to ask why, if the material moved from Kings to Isaiah, the historian/editor of Kings allowed the material to appear out of chronological order (for the Merodach-Baladan incident [2 Ki. 20:12; Is. 39] and its antecedent in Hezekiah's illness [2 Ki. 20:1–11; Is. 38] must be earlier than the Sennacherib incidents). There is no justification for this in the Kings narrative.

More detailed comparison of the two pericopes shows that Kings is consistently longer than Isaiah. In addition to Hezekiah's prayer (38:9–20), there are only seven places where Isaiah has a word or particle more than Kings (*w^e*, 36:10; *'ēt*, 36:13; 37:2; *hā'elleh*, 36:20; *s^ebā'ōt*, 37:16; 39:5; *kol*, 37:17) but there are twenty-nine places (in addition to 18:14–16 and 20:6–11) where Kings has more than Isaiah. But there is no consistency of practice such as a precis writer or an expansionist editor might adopt. Isaiah adds *'ēt* at 36:13 but omits it at 38:2; adds the stylish *w^e* at 36:10 but omits the stylish *nā'* at 37:19. The abbreviation of 2 Kings 20:6–11 is difficult if not impossible to explain at the hands of an Isaiah editor, for the reduction diminishes the role played by the prophet—his dramatic recall (20:4); the immediacy of Hezekiah's healing (20:5; which the Isaiah text knows but relegates to a footnote, 38:22); the conversation and prayer regarding the sign (20:9–11). Such abbreviations (including the account of Hezekiah's submission to Sennacherib; 2 Ki. 18:14–16) are unlikely for a later editor long after the events but are, of course, consistent with purposeful Isaianic use of the material close to the times themselves.

Turning to passages where the wording is different, it is unthinkable that Isaiah himself or an Isaianic editor would have, for example, altered 'place' to 'land' (2 Ki. 18:25; Is. 36:10). At Isaiah 36:8, 16 'my master the king' and 'the king' (NIV, *the king of Assyria*) sound nearer the event than 'the king of Assyria' in 2 Kings 18:23, 31. Some reserve must be exercised here, however, in that there is textual uncertainty over the NIV's *of Assyria* which has the appearance of a super-added explanation (see commentary). At 2 Kings 18:36 the 'unclassical' perfect with weak *waw* reflects the annalistic style of court memoranda (2 Ki. 18:4; 21:4, 6; 23: 4–5, 10, 12, 14), but Isaiah (36:21) has

⁷⁵ See S. J. Devries, *1 Kings* (Word Books, 1985).

the classical imperfect consecutive. There are differences which cannot be explained on any theory of either borrowing from the other, e.g. compare 2 Kings 18:26 ('speak with us', 'immānū) with Isaiah 36:11 ('to us', 'ēlēnū); 2 Kings 19:23 (*mal'ākeykā*) with Isaiah 37:24 ('*abādeyka*'); and 2 Kings 20:19 with Isaiah 39:8. Isaiah 37:18, with its textual difficulties, cannot possibly be derived directly from 2 Kings.

The major Isaianic addition is Hezekiah's prayer. This is consistent with the tradition that Isaiah wrote an account of Hezekiah's reign (2 Ch. 32:32; cf. 2 Ch. 26:22).

The theory which best fits the facts is that both Isaiah and Kings had access to annals and records and used them to suit their own purposes as historians. This would explain why Kings (18:14–16) includes, but Isaiah omits, Hezekiah's submission. The one aims at a greater completeness of detail, the other at a historical excerpt wedded to a theological purpose. It would also suit explanatory additions in Kings such as 'in Jerusalem' (18:22) or 'the king of Assyria' (18:23, 31). On the other hand, the Isaianic abbreviation of the account of Hezekiah's healing and the addition of 38:9–20 reflects the prophet's own hand. It shows his unwillingness to focus on himself when his purpose is to excite faith in the Lord and also reveals his privileged access to Hezekiah's 'private papers'. *s̄bā'ōt* in 37:16; 39:5 is typically Isaianic.

The reversed chronology remains one of the most interesting points in the comparison. While on any theory it remains difficult to understand why Kings perpetuates the placing of Hezekiah's illness and the Merodach-Baladan pericope *after* the Sennacherib stories, this order is the only one which suits Isaiah's purpose. The Sennacherib stories form the perfect capstone to chapters 28–35, indeed to chapters 6–35; and the Merodach-Baladan story forms the perfect introduction to chapters 40–55 (see commentary). While, therefore, the details of the two sets of narratives require independent working with the available records, the replication in Kings of the reversed chronology must mean that the Isaiah tradition of relating these events was well established by the time of the historian/editor of Kings.

Isaiah 38–55

The book of the Servant

It is typical in the Isaianic literature that a hint made in one section becomes the theme of the next.¹ In reply to the developing darkness of the prefatory chapters (1–5), and in particular the possibility that divine grace had been exhausted (5:1–7), Isaiah discovered in his own experience that forgiveness and reconciliation with God through sacrifice was still a reality (6:1–7). It would have been logical for him to develop this key thought at once but he did not do so. It emerges, however, in chapters 6–12 that individual experience is the clue to communal restoration (*cf.* the balance between chapters 6 and 12 and the stress in 8:11–18 on the individual believer). Isaiah rather made it to be his priority to face the political errors of his day with the vision of the coming Messianic king, but the reality of sin and the need for forgiveness remain, and it is to this that Isaiah turns in the second book of his trilogy.

The book opens with a historical prologue: Hezekiah's illness (chapter 38) becomes the pretext for an embassy from Merodach-Baladan of Babylon (chapter 39). Out of this arises the prediction of Babylonian captivity. For the rest of the book, Isaiah follows the pattern which he developed in connection with the final Assyrian crisis in chapters 28–35. First, he deals with the situation in terms of principles of divine action (40:1–42:17; *cf.* chapters 28–29); next he turns to apply his message to the historical situation, at the same time mingling oracles which look beyond to the undated future (42:18–48:22; *cf.* chapters 30–32); and finally, he envisages the ultimate acts of God, though seeing them in thought-forms suggested by the historical crisis through which the people of God are to pass (chapters 49–55; *cf.* chapters 33–35).

A Historical prologue: Hezekiah's fatal choice (38:1–39:8)

B¹ Universal consolation (40:1–42:17)

b¹ The consolation of Israel (40:1–41:20)

¹ The 'Davidic hint' in 1:26 provides the theme for chapters 6–12; the allusion to the world-wide sway of the Davidic king in chapters 6–12 (9:7–6; 11:9–10) becomes the theme in chapters 13–27; the use of Egypt and Assyria as symbols of the world people (19:24–25; 27:11–12) of the Lord provides the main topic in chapters 28–37; the undeveloped references to atonement, salvation and redemption in chapters 6–35 (6:7; 25:9; 35:9–10) provide the topic announced in 40:1–2; the promises of forgiveness in 43:22–44:23 are fulfilled in chapters 48–55; and the allusion to divine conquest in chapters 40–55 (42:13) becomes the foremost idea in chapters 56–66 (63:1–6).

b² The consolation of the Gentiles ([41:21–42:17](#))
 C¹ Promises of redemption ([42:18–44:23](#))
 c¹ Release ([42:18–43:21](#))
 c² Forgiveness ([43:22–44:23](#))
 C² Agents of redemption ([44:24–53:12](#))
 c¹ Cyrus: liberation ([44:24–48:22](#))
 c² The Servant: atonement ([49:1–53:12](#))
 B² Universal proclamation ([54:1–55:13](#))
 b¹ The call to Zion ([54:1–17](#))
 b² The call to the world ([55:1–13](#))

A. Historical prologue: Hezekiah's fatal choice ([38:1–39:8](#))

The events in these chapters pre-date those in chapters [36–37](#) by some years (see the Additional note on p. [285](#) and the comment on [39:1](#)). They cover three matters: Hezekiah's illness ([38:1–8](#)); the personal record he made of his thoughts when he faced death and when he was healed ([38:9–22](#)); and the account of the embassy sent by Mero-dach-Baladan of Babylon ([39:1–8](#)). Narratives do not usually lend themselves to the same rounded presentation as poetry but there is sufficient symmetry here to indicate that this is not a haphazard association of stories but a planned statement:

A¹ Hezekiah contemplates death ([38:1a](#))

B¹ Isaiah and the word of the Lord: *Isaiah ... went ... and said ... ‘This is what the LORD says ...’* ([1b](#))

C¹ Hezekiah's dedication ([8–22](#))

C² Hezekiah's defection ([39:1–2](#))

B² Isaiah and the word of the Lord: *Isaiah ... went ... and said ... ‘Hear the word of the LORD ...’* ([3–7](#))

A² Hezekiah contemplates life ([8](#))

Hezekiah was one of the most truly human of the kings, and his portrait here accords with what is recorded elsewhere. He was a man whose heart was genuinely moved towards the Lord but whose will was fickle under the pressures and temptations of life. Like the David who was his ancestor, and unlike the greater David who was his descendant, his first thoughts were for himself. On hearing of his imminent death his only cry amounted to ‘I do not want to die’ (38:2–3), and on hearing of a dark future for his sons his private thought was ‘There will be peace ... in my lifetime’ (39:8). Isaiah also, as we shall see, emerges as the same prophet we meet throughout his book, acting, reacting and saying just as we would expect. And indeed the same is true of Merodach-Baladan. Neither the content nor tone of the narrative, nor the characterization of the participants justifies scepticism about the historical integrity of the section or supports Clements’ suggestion of a later ‘legend’ or ‘royal Novelle’ to which the name of Isaiah was gratuitously attached.²

a. *Hezekiah’s illness (38:1–8)*

1 On precise reckoning from a presumed death of Hezekiah in 687, the fifteen extra years granted in verse 5 would date the sickness in 702. Since Merodach-Baladan’s second period as king of Babylon (see on 39:1) ended in his defeat at the hands of Sennacherib sometime in 702, this would necessitate the arrival of the envoys in the early part of that year (see on 39:1).³ The phrase *In those days* indicates that we have here an excerpt from an originally longer document, which we may identify with Isaiah’s record of Hezekiah referred to in 2 Chronicles 32:32. *Put your house in order*/‘Command your house’ is the standard formula (cf. 2 Sa. 17:23).

2–3 Prayer and tears. Hezekiah came to the Lord with prayer, an appeal to his good record and tears. When the Lord replied (5) he alluded only to the prayer and the tears.

² Clements, pp. 288–289.

³ Mauchline proposes a date about 710 for Hezekiah’s illness but does not indicate how this fits in with the fifteen extra years of life promised to him. As far as the illness is concerned, any date prior to 701 will do provided it falls within either of the periods of Merodach-Baladan’s rule in Babylon. Though some suggest that even outside these two periods he was still an anti-Assyrian agitator of a high order. To date the illness early in 702 demands a tight but not impossible timetable.

It is clear that Hezekiah came short of understanding the simple reality of faith expressing itself in prayer, resorting also to the bargaining power of good works. He appealed in turn to steadfastness in action ('he had *walked ... faithfully*') and inner integrity (*wholehearted devotion*) with God. And his record was impressive. [2 Chronicles 32:1](#) notes ruefully that 'after all that Hezekiah had so faithfully done' (the truly magnificent work of religious reform; [2 Ch. 29–31](#)) Sennacherib arrived! But the Lord looks on the heart. Sennacherib would not have come had Hezekiah kept himself free from the worldly expedient of arms, alliances and rebellion. It is an indication of our limited self-awareness that Hezekiah should plead on the basis of his integrity of heart; an indication too of the kindly mercy of the Lord that he hears our prayers even when they rest on false assumptions. *Bitterly* is (lit.) 'wept a great weeping' or 'wept copiously'.

4–8 The word and the sign. The Kings account of this incident is more dramatic: Isaiah was on his way from the palace when the fresh word struck (hence here, *Go and tell*). The Lord was not slow to answer the tearful if inexact prayer. The ground on which prayer is answered is not human faithfulness ([3](#)) but the faithfulness of *the God of your father David* ([5](#)). He made promises to David and he does not depart from them in relation to David's sons. Yet he says *I have heard your prayer*. The actual intercession of Hezekiah was intrinsic to the situation. In answer to prayer the Lord first addresses the specific need and then runs beyond it to meet needs that were not mentioned but are known to him. It is important to note that no conditions are attached. These promises are stated as a fact incapable of forfeiture. (*Cf. 2 Ki. 20:6* where the added words 'for my sake and for the sake of my servant David' make the unconditional absoluteness of the Lord's undertaking even more explicit.) On *defend* ($\sqrt{gānan}$) see [31:5; 37:35](#).

7–8 Regarding *the sign*, textual uncertainties in verse [8⁴](#) do not cloud what was

⁴ The textual difficulty of verse [8](#) is displayed if one attempts a literal translation: 'Look, I am going to bring back the shadow (masculine) on the stairs which it (feminine) has gone down on the stairs of Ahaz by the sun (feminine) backwards ten stairs. So the sun returned ten stairs on the stairs which (where) it had gone down.' The most direct solution is to read *haššemeš* (*the sun*) instead of *baššemeš* ('by the sun'), thus providing a feminine subject for the verb 'has gone down'. The curious expression 'ten stairs on the stairs' may be an accidental repetition of 'stairs' with consequent adjustment of an original definite article to the preposition 'on'. The text would then read: 'Look, I am going to bring back the shadow on the stairs, where the sun has declined on the

promised. The *stairway of Ahaz* (leading to his ‘upper room’?; [2 Ki 23:12](#)), either by chance or by design, recorded the moving shadow of the sun’s passage, and the confirmatory sign attached to the Lord’s promise was that the shadow would retreat ten steps. It would be as improper for us to be dogmatic about how this was done as to deny what is plainly stated. Scripture presents the Creator God as the sovereign master of his creation, and the believing mind accepts that he could at will add ten units of time to that day. It was Ahaz who was invited to ask for a sign as high as heaven ([7:11](#)) in support of the Lord’s commitment to the house of David, and it was fitting, therefore, that the Lord should move heaven in confirming his promise to protect David’s city. The barest requirement of the verse is that the shadow moved, involving a divine manipulation of light whereby the shadow retreated (and did it then resume its former position?). But either way, a miracle of God was wrought in confirmation of his word to the king. In [2 Kings 20:9ff.](#) Isaiah discusses with the king (see on verse [22](#)) alternative possibilities in the sign, but here he adapts the narrative to reveal his own perceptions of the event, using words reminiscent of [7:14](#). He is neither falsifying nor resorting to tendentious misrepresentation but isolating the crucial factor, a *sign* (lit.) ‘from [being] with/from the very presence of the LORD’. Hezekiah stands, as surely as ever Ahaz did, at the point of perilous decision wherein the way of faith will prove to be the way of salvation.

b. Hezekiah’s psalm: a meditation on death and life ([38:9–20](#))

We may reasonably suppose that Isaiah had access to Hezekiah’s private papers in connection with [2 Chronicles 32:32](#), but his knowledge of the psalm’s existence would not of itself require him to include it. Like the foregoing narrative, which recorded the unconditional promise of safety to the king, the psalm reveals another piece of essential background to the key incident of the embassy ([39:1](#)). In the psalm we find that Hezekiah was fully aware of the peril he had been in: to die under divine wrath ([13](#)), without hope ([17b](#)) and with sin at that time unforgiven ([17c](#)). He also knew how he had been rescued: by prayer ([14](#)), the divine response ([15ab](#)) and the disposition of the Lord to save ([20](#); see below). It was to the man with this experience of the power of prayer—indeed also to the man who, in response to healing, had made commitments to

stairs of Ahaz, backwards ten stairs. So the sun returned the ten stairs which it had declined.’ But as so often, uncertainty of detail in a text does nothing to obscure the meaning of the whole.

the Lord ([15c–16b](#))—that the test of Merodach-Baladan’s offer came.

A¹ The gates of Sheol: sorrow at the shortening of days ([10](#))

B¹ The land of the living exchanged for the departed ([11](#))

C¹ Divine hostility: images of despair ([12–14](#))

C² Divine restoration: responsive commitment ([15–17](#))

B² The land of the departed exchanged for the land of the living ([18–19](#))

A² The house of the Lord: joy over days prolonged ([20](#))

The gates of Sheol ([38:9–11](#))

9 The title of the poem is ‘When he was sick and had recovered from his sickness’. The poem sets out to review the whole experience. This is its importance in the narrative. Hezekiah had this clear awareness of the facts and the issues involved: the danger, how prayer delivered him and his responsive commitments.

10 *I said* is ‘I for my part said’/‘had made up my mind to the fact’. *Prime* is ‘middle’. *Death/Sheol* is the place of the departed (see [5:14](#); [14:9](#)). On *robbed* ($\sqrt{pāqad}$) see [24:21](#) and footnote. Here it means basically, ‘I have been visited regarding ...’ and hence ‘I have been made to miss’ or ‘I have been punished in relation to’. To sorrow over what seems an untimely death is not peculiar to the Old Testament (*cf.* [Phil. 2:27](#)). In both Testaments this life has its own peculiar preciousness which not even the illumination of immortality ([2 Tim. 1:10](#)) takes away.

11 Hezekiah does not say that he will see neither God nor *mankind* in Sheol (for the latter at least *cf.* the introduction to [14:9](#)) but that contact with God and mankind *in the land of the living* will be over. *This world* involves altering the *MT* to *heled* ([Ps. 17:14](#); [49:1](#) [<2>](#)) from the otherwise unused *hadel*, which is a correctly derived noun from $\sqrt{hādal}$ meaning ‘to cease’ and hence ‘cessation’. Beyond this life Hezekiah envisages himself (lit.) ‘along with those who dwell in cessation’, *i.e.* they are still alive but this life is over.

Images of despair ([38:12–14](#))

Four similes constitute this section: the fragility of life (the *tent*); its decisive end (the *weaver*); divine hostility (the *lion*); and the seeming feebleness of prayer (the *swift, thrush and dove*).

12 *House* is ‘encampment’ and *pulled down* is ‘moved on’ ($\sqrt{nāsa}$; as [37:37](#)). Death is

the great invader compelling the vanquished to move their fragile home. Hezekiah pictures himself as the weaver who has finished his pattern, detached it from the loom and rolled it up. Like the weaver, the individual weaves the pattern of his life and what he has weaved he takes with him. The picture is of personal responsibility within the unknown limits of life. But within the same simile there is another aspect: one who snips off the thread. In other words, the individual weaves his own pattern on the loom of life but the limit of material allocated to him, the time for weaving, is decided by another who (lit.) ‘cuts me off from the loom’. Death is in the hands of the Lord ([Heb. 9:27](#)). *Day and night* is (lit.) ‘from day to night’ (cf. [Jb. 4:20](#)), an idiom of imminent action implying ‘Before the day is out’. *You made* is imperfect tense, meaning either ‘you make’ or ‘you will make’—the moment of death, ever imminent, is God’s decision.

13 *I waited*/‘I smoothed [my soul]’ or ‘I composed myself’ ($\sqrt{\text{šāwā}}$ in piel; the full expression, of which this is an ellipsis, is in [Ps. 131:2](#)). Hezekiah sees himself as a sick man who has come through another day and settled himself for the night but there is no cessation of divine hostility. God is as hostile as a *lion*, strong enough to smash the very *bones*. Hezekiah is speaking here of death as he faced it, not of everyone’s death. He knew himself to be the object of divine hostility for it seems that in his illness he discerned personal sin as its cause (see verse [17ef](#)). He lived with the ceaseless expectation of death and with a sense of incessant divine hostility, death under the wrath of God.

14 *I cried* is ‘I keep chattering on’. In the crisis he kept a ceaseless stream of intercession but it seemed as feeble and unavailing as birdsong, not least because the strain of prayer was an additional burden making the sick man grow *weak*. The prayer as recorded expressed the need (*I am troubled*/‘oppression to me’/‘How oppressed I am!');⁵ looked to the power of God, *O Lord* (${}^a\text{dōnāy}$, ‘sovereign one’); and asked God to make the need his own, *come to my aid* ($\sqrt{\text{'ārab}}$, ‘go bail for me’/‘be my surety’).

Divine restoration ([38:15–17](#))

The initial *But* should be omitted. Abruptly the poem swings from prayer to answer. Mere birdsong it may seem ([14](#)) in the face of the power of death and the hostile God, but it prevails! The matter is inexplicable: ‘What can I say and anyone say to me?—He

⁵ On the form of the noun ‘*ošqâ* (with metheg in the opening syllable) see [GKC 9v; 48iN. BHS](#) makes the minor adjustment to ‘*ošqa*, the imperative of $\sqrt{\text{'āšaq}}$ (‘to care for’).

himself has taken action!' Hezekiah came out of danger so quickly and dramatically that only an act of God can account for it; there is no human explanation. Following this, Hezekiah affirms that past experience will govern all his future life: *I will walk humbly* ($\sqrt{dādā}$). In Psalm 42:4 <5> the word is used of walking in a religious procession, hence 'to walk thoughtfully or carefully, to watch one's step'.

16 Difficulties attend the precise understanding of this verse⁶ but its thrust is clear emdash 'By reference to such things people should live', i.e. others should take note of Hezekiah's experience and many such similar things and order their lives accordingly. He will set the example himself: 'and in regard to all they contain is the life of my spirit'. *Spirit* is the energetic direction and conduct of life. So that there will be no doubt what *such things* and *them* refer to, Hezekiah triumphantly repeats the heart of the matter: *You restored me to health and let me live.*

17 All the anguish was worth it: it was *for my benefit* ($\check{šālōm}$, 'wellbeing, wholeness, fulfilment'). In particular, it brought to Hezekiah an experience of divine *love*, of rescue from *the pit*, and of forgiveness of *sins*. *In your love* is prefaced by the conjunction 'and', used here to introduce an explanation of what has preceded. The Hebrew says 'You loved my soul from the pit,'⁷ which is a pregnant construction binding together the fact of deliverance and the motive of love. *Destruction* ($b^{el}î$ from $\sqrt{bālā}$, 'to wear out, become old' and hence 'termination, weakness') is death as the end of earthly life, the feebleness of the departed (14:9). The original 'For' before *you have put* should be restored. The assurance of deliverance from the pit rests on a final dealing with sin. *Put/‘thrown’ ... behind etc.* is a vivid picture of what is no longer the subject of attention or concern. Here is a window into Hezekiah's self-understanding—and therefore into his view of death. He saw his illness as a divine judicial visitation on sin and his death in such cir-

⁶ Uncertainty in this verse centres on the two phrases *by such things* (lit. 'by them') and *in them*. On the use of the masculine pronoun 'by them' cf. an identical use in 64:5. In context, the preposition 'by' is the same as that translated 'because' in verse 15d and should have a parallel rendering in verse 16a in order to make the connection between pronoun and antecedent. The phrase *in them* involves a feminine pronoun, the usual Hebrew idiom for expressing the abstract or general.

⁷ The change from $hāšaqtā$ ('you have loved') to $hāšaqtā$ ('you have held back') is minute and provides an acceptable meaning but at the expense of destroying the fulness of meaning expressed by the MT.

cumstances as dying unforgiven.

The house of the Lord (38:18–20)

18 Note how, structurally, the *cannot* ... *cannot* of this verse matches the ‘not ... no longer’ in the parallel verse **11**. Hezekiah must not be considered as making a comment on death in general but on his sort of death in particular: dying under divine wrath, with sin unforgiven.⁸ In such circumstances *the grave* (‘Sheol’; see on verse **10**) offers no *praise*/‘thanks’; *those who go down to the pit* with God as their foe and with their sins unforgiven *cannot hope*/‘do not wait in hope’ for delivering *faithfulness* such as Hezekiah experienced.

19 In the same way, Hezekiah defines *the living* as those who can do *as I am doing today*, offering praise to the Lord for his love which delivers and forgives, for his *faithfulness*. *They praise* (as verse **18**) is ‘they give thanks’. The Old Testament prizes parental instruction (**Dt. 6:4–9**; **Pr. 4:1**) and here Hezekiah, who has already pledged personal devotion (**15–16**), implicitly pledges domestic devotion.

20 What a contrast between *the temple* [‘house’] *of the LORD* and the gates of Sheol (**10**)! Salvation affords entrance to a life of praise in the presence of the Lord. So Hezekiah concludes his psalm. *The LORD will save* is an infinitive construction expressing direction, tendency or aim,⁹ i.e. ‘The LORD was committed to saving me’ or ‘was all for saving me’. He traces his deliverance to the heart of the Lord, the gracious will lying behind the act. The third element in Hezekiah’s commitment is communal devotion (*we will sing*). First we had the ‘I’ of verse **15c**, then the ‘fathers’ of verse **19c** and now the *we* of the worshipping fellowship. *Temple* is (lit.) ‘house’, where the Lord lives in the midst of his people.

c. Hezekiah’s healing (38:21–22)

This is a final piece of background to the arrival of the embassy in **39:1**. In **2 Kings 20:7–8** the medical prescription Isaiah gave and the king’s request for a sign are embedded in the narrative. Here they are isolated as demanding attention in their own right.

⁸ Pss. **6:5**; **30:9**; **88:10–12** are often used to suggest that the Old Testament lacked any hope after death. In each case, however, the context is the same as in Hezekiah’s psalm: the prospect of death out of favour with God.

⁹ Lit. ‘The Lord to save me’. See **GKC 114f** and **i**; Driver, 204.

In support of the Lord's promise of healing, Isaiah provided an outward token of healing. Its connection with the promise makes it an acted oracle, an embodiment of the word of the Lord. Thus Hezekiah had a double resting-place for faith (the Lord's word and the Lord's act), but still he could not quite feel convinced so he sought the fuller sign. But, as the sequel now shows, having asked for a sign to support his faith he failed to maintain his walk of faith. Ahaz faithlessly refused to ask ([7:1off.](#)); Hezekiah asked but faithlessly failed to act conformably.

d. The moment of decision ([39:1–8](#))

The envoys ([39:1–2](#))

At that time ('ēt) refers not to a date but to an occasion charged with some special significance. Hezekiah had received a promise touching himself and his city ([38:5–6](#)). The fulfilment of the personal promise should surely have made him hold firmly to the national promise too. Furthermore, his experience of the Lord's deliverance in healing and restoration had led him to make personal commitments ([38:10–20](#)). In addition, the great sign of the sun-shadow ([38:7–8, 22](#)) was a cosmic act of God in demonstration of his sovereign intentions. It was to this Hezekiah that the envoys came.

Twice Merodach-Baladan established in Babylon a credible alternative to the power of the then ascendant Assyria:¹⁰ from the death of Shalmaneser (722) until he was ousted by Sargon in 710 and fled to Elam, and from the death of Sargon (705) until he was defeated by Sennacherib in 702. Indeed, such was his power that in 703 he had marched into central Babylon, gathered fresh allies among the Aramean tribes along the Tigris, and defeated the Assyrians at Kish. If we take 687 as a precise date for the death of Hezekiah and the fifteen years of [38:5](#) as an exact figure, the ambassadors came in 702. At this time Merodach-Baladan knew that Sennacherib's counter-offensive could not be long delayed and, with characteristic opportunism, he sought to prompt a diversionary rising in western Palestine.

2 That *Hezekiah received the envoys gladly*¹¹ is understandable, but to take them on a

¹⁰ On this whole period see Erlandsson.

¹¹ 2 Ki. 20:13 has the formal 'Hezekiah heard them' (*wayyišma'*), i.e. 'granted them an audience'. It is typical of Isaiah, the word-master, to change this to 'delighted in them' (*wayyišmah*), neatly exposing the king's heart.

tour of his treasures and armaments goes beyond the response that a mere convalescent gift requires. It could only mean that the envoys had come with a concealed agenda: would Hezekiah join a rebellion? And Hezekiah was only too ready to agree. His about-face in relation to all that went before in chapter 38 could not be more complete. Faith and commitment lie in ruins.

The word of the Lord (39:3–8)

The question, ‘*What did those men say?*’ (3) implies the concealed agenda of verse 2. We note that Hezekiah did not answer this question. But he could not resist the sense of importance that it gave him to say, *From a distant land ... from Babylon*. Thus *Babylon* was said to Isaiah before (6) Isaiah said it back to the king, and consequently the scene contains all that is required in a modern understanding of the prophets. First, the facts are agreeable to the time at which the events purport to have taken place. Secondly, the matter predicted lies within the practical possibilities of the day: Merodach-Baladan was a power equal to Assyria, as he had recently proved in his defeat of the armies of Sennacherib. There is nothing politically obtuse in Isaiah suggesting a Babylonian subjugation of Judah.¹² Thirdly, the message spoken was relevant to those to whom it was addressed. In its way, this incident is a set-piece example of all that modern study sees as definitive of a proper understanding of the predictive element in prophecy—yet few modern commentaries accept the incident as a genuine record of an event in 702 BC!¹³

¹² The older writer T. K. Cheyne (*The Prophecies of Isaiah* [Kegan Paul, 1884]) thinks that Isaiah could not have predicted this removal to Babylon because he had already (21:1–10) predicted the fall of Babylon. But even if Isaiah envisaged a prompt exit to Babylon (see the following note), the earlier prediction would only enhance his sense of the suffering and loss which poor leadership was bringing on the people, *i.e.* exile to a doomed city.

¹³ Herbert suggests that this passage originally referred to Nineveh and that Babylon was substituted after the fall of Jerusalem in 586 BC. Kaiser dates the whole narrative post-586, treating it as an imaginative fiction. See also Clements, along with Oswalt’s telling rejoinder. We must beware of creating our own difficulties within this pericope. Skinner speaks for many when he says, ‘It is hardly credible that Isaiah would have disclosed to him the remote fate of his descendants’, *i.e.* predict what we know to have been at that point still over a century off. But this is to confuse the situation by inserting what we know by hindsight. Isaiah says nothing about ‘remote’ or ‘a century

The whole incident is full of a reality and relevance that advertises its veracity. Isaiah foretold the Babylonian captivity because the whole concept of ‘Babylon’ was handed to him by Hezekiah. What more could he say than ‘If you love Babylon so much you will be glad to know that all you take such pride in is going there’. Thus *Babylon* in verse 3 is matched by *Babylon* in verse 5, and *everything* in verse 4 by *everything* in verse 5. There is a true *quid pro quo* about the acts of God, an inevitability and a rightness. In very truth, Hezekiah, by refusing the way of faith, had thrown in ‘his lot’ with Babylon! *Almighty*/‘of hosts’ is not in 2 Kings 20:16 and is a typically Isaianic amplification, deeply suited to this context. Hezekiah looked to the collective strength of alliance with Babylon and forgot where real power lay. *Descendants*/‘sons’ (7) is used generally of male descendants, remote as well as immediate.

What a wretched response from Hezekiah (8; cf. 38:2)! The earlier oracle (38:1) is as categorical as the prediction here in verses 5–7, yet it was found to be pliant under the pressure of prayer and tears (38:5). But the king had been given a chance to play politics in the first league and he was not now going to return to the ‘milk and water’ of true religion. When pride replaces humility, self-satisfaction replaces concern for others, and works replace faith then the die is cast and the kingdom is doomed. When the word of God is met with smugness instead of tears and prayers, the word proves its obduracy and accomplishes its grim purposes.

B. The consolation of the world (40:1–42:17)

For the place of this passage in the presentation of world redemption in chapters 40–55 see p. 289.

hence’. He says ‘your sons’, a usage close enough to challenge and shake the king’s complacency and open enough to make the prediction undated. With all the prophets, his concern was not prognostication but moral confrontation. Isaiah wanted Hezekiah to feel immediately the consequence of his act (however long that consequence was, in divine forbearance, delayed).

1. The consolation of Zion ([40:1–41:20](#))

No sooner the message of disaster ([39:5–7](#)) than the message of comfort ([40:1–2](#))! Such is the theological acumen that placed (what we call) chapter [40](#) after chapter [39](#)—or that saw chapter [39](#) as the correct preface to chapter [40](#). Though the disaster must fall on unfaithfulness, there is still an earthly reality to be called ‘my people’ to whom the Lord is ‘your God’ ([40:1](#)). The Zion promises may be forfeited but they cannot perish. This is the way in which Isaiah solved the problem created by his own prophetic ministry. It may be put this way. He must either follow chapters [38–39](#) with an apology for holding out hopes regarding Zion which have now been proved illusory, or else he must vindicate those hopes in the face of disaster by reiterating them in a way that takes account of the new situation.

The theological centre-piece of this section on the consolation of Zion is [40:12–41:7](#) with its two great doctrines of the God of Israel. He is God the Creator ([40:12–31](#)), guaranteeing that in all the multiplicity that makes up the universe his people are his central concern, and the ruler of history ([41:1–7](#)), in executive control of all persons and forces on the world stage. The comfort of this doctrine of God is brought home to Israel by three voices preaching consolation ([40:1–11](#)) and by three pictures of people, helpless in themselves but privileged and protected in their God ([41:8–20](#)).

A¹ Three voices commanded to preach comfort ([40:1–11](#))

Divine intervention, universal revelation ([3–5](#))

God’s unchanging word ([6–8](#))

The advent of the warrior-shepherd ([9–11](#))

B¹ The God of Israel is the Creator ([12–31](#))

B² The God of Israel is ruler of history ([41:1–7](#))

A² Three pictures of consolation ([8–20](#))

The slave becomes the victor ([8–13](#))

The worm becomes a threshing-sledge ([14–16](#))

The needy sustained in the desert ([17–20](#))

a. *Three voices of consolation* ([40:1–11](#))

The commissioning of the heralds ([40:1–2](#))

1 The plural imperatives *Comfort, comfort* address the three ‘voices’ of verses [3](#), [7](#) and [9](#),

but the scene is best understood as a heavenly court on the analogy of [1 Kings 22:19](#). The Lord has ‘taken counsel’ as to the best course of action and sends his emissaries accordingly. The adjustment to the [MT](#) which makes verse [6](#) first person singular (see below) fits in with this picture, for the true prophet was one who ‘stood in the council of the LORD and heard his word’ ([Je. 23:18, 22](#)). The repetition of the command suggests emotional intensity and is characteristic of this part of Isaiah (e.g. [43:11, 25; 51:9, 17; 52:1](#)). *Says your God* is imperfect tense with the sense ‘keeps saying’ and is almost peculiar to the Isaianic literature ([1:11, 18; 33:10; 40:1, 25; 41:21; 66:9](#)).

[2 Speak tenderly](#)/‘speak to the heart’ (cf. [Gn. 34:3; Ru. 2:13; Ho. 2:14 <16>](#)) is not just expressing comfort and kindness but is seeking to persuade, inviting to respond to love. *Hard service* (*ṣābā*)¹ here means ‘period of duress’, but the word contains the idea of duress which serves a purpose. The noun and verb *nirṣâ* ‘*a wônâ* (her sin has been paid for) appear in [Leviticus 26:41, 43](#), meaning ‘to accept punishment for iniquity’. The passive, as used in Isaiah, means ‘the punishment of their iniquity has been accepted as satisfactory’, i.e. by God, for the passive of the verb is used only of God’s acceptance of the levitical offerings. The only cases of this passive usage are [Leviticus 1:4; 7:18; 19:7; 22:23, 25, 27](#), which are all concerned with the offering of blood sacrifice.² The development of this section of Isaiah will reveal that the ‘period of duress’ can be identified with the Babylonian captivity ([43:14](#)) and the satisfactory payment with the sacrifice of the Servant of the Lord ([52:13ff.](#)). The central reality of the sacrifices, guaranteeing their efficacy, was that they were a divine provision, from the *LORD’s hand*, not a human expedient ([Lv. 17:11](#); cf. [53:6](#)). *Double* (*kiplayim*) is a dualized form of the noun *kepel* from √*kāpal*, meaning ‘to fold double’ ([Ex. 26:9; 28:16; 39:9; Ezk. 21:19](#)). The dual form³ occurs elsewhere only in [Job 11:6](#), where the NIV concurs with Dhorme that divine wisdom is hard for humans to understand because it always has ‘two sides’. That is, while perfectly coherent in itself it is always more than we can see at any given time. Simon

¹ *ṣābā*’ can mean army ([Jdg. 8:6](#)); the fixed period of levitical service ([Nu. 4:3](#)); the fixed duration of life (with implication of hardship) ([Jb. 7:1](#)).

² [KB](#) accepts a second √*rāṣâ* (‘to pay off/make restitution’) suggested in [Lv. 26:34, 41, 43; 2 Ch. 36:21](#). Hence the NIV here.

³ On *kepel* in [Jb. 41:13](#)<5> Dhorme notes that the word means ‘double’ and therefore at that point the ‘lining’ of something.

adapts this to the present case by saying that ‘Yahweh replies to all her sins ... not with the grocer’s scale and weights, but with a double pardon ... the pardon of grace’, which presumably means ‘amply, generously’.⁴ If, however, the noun means ‘the double’, the dual usage suggests the two halves of something folded in half, the one being the replica of the other. This points to a meaning like ‘the equivalent’ or ‘that which exactly matches’ (cf. Whybray).⁵ *For* is a preposition of price, meaning ‘in payment for’. On *sin* (‘āwōn) and *sins* (*hatṭāt*) see 6:7.

The first voice: the glory of the Lord (40:3–5)

The passage opens with the human voice (3a) and ends with the divine voice (5c). It contrasts the unpromising landscape (3b–e) with the coming glory (5ab), and calls for total transformation in preparation (4).

3 A *voice* is used in an exclamatory way (cf. 13:4; 66:6) meaning, ‘Listen, someone is calling out’. The picture of *the way for the LORD* is not an exodus motif of the Lord’s people journeying home: they are not called to prepare that way, for it is ready for them (35:8; 42:16; 43:16–19; 48:17–21; 55:12). Rather, it combines the ancient picture of the Lord coming to his people’s aid (Dt. 33:2; Jdg. 5:4; Ps. 68:4 ‘5 , 7 8’) with the practice of constructing processional ways for visiting dignitaries or for use by the gods as they were carried in procession.⁶ The Lord’s road is to be straight (3d), level (4ab) and free of obstacle (4cd), i.e. he will arrive without fail, travel without difficulty and be undelayed by hindrances.

4 *Rugged places* (*rēkāsîm* from √ *rākas*, ‘to bind’) could be ‘mountain chain’, which suits its parallel with *plain* (lit.) ‘cleft’, i.e. a pass.

5 *The glory* is the Lord’s presence (Ex. 16:10; 40:34f.); the Lord revealed in some specific act (Ex. 16:7; Nu. 14:22); his repute and character (Ps. 79:9); or is his exalted state (3:8; Je. 13:16). Meditation on the exodus developed the thought that it took place not only before the watching world (*all mankind/all flesh*) but also for the world (Pss 47;

⁴ Simon, p. 37.

⁵ The similar word *mišnēh* is used in the sense of ‘a second/double’, what replaces a first (see 61:7; Dt. 17:18; Je. 16:18).

⁶ Herbert notes the Babylonian hymn: ‘Make his [Nabu’s] way good, renew his road. Make straight his path, hew him out a track’.

95–100). This suggests taking *see* in its double sense of observing and experiencing. Thus Isaiah unobtrusively introduces the universal dimension of the coming work of God. *For the mouth of the LORD has spoken* stresses the origin of the message in God and the exactness of transmission on earth of what he has said in heaven. (See 1:20; 58:14 for this same formula; cf. 21:17; 22:25; 25:8. Outside Isaiah it is found only at 1 Ki. 14:11; Joel 3:8 <4:8> ; Ob. 18; Mi. 4:4.)

The second voice: the word of our God (40:6–8)

Men are transient and unreliable but the Lord's *word* endures (Nu. 23:19). The executive factor in the ebb and flow of life is the Spirit of the Lord. Thus divine energy underwrites stated divine purposes. On *A voice says* or 'Listen, someone is saying' see verse 3. *And I said* adopts the reading in Q^a, reflected in the LXX. This resembles other places where Isaiah calls attention to his awareness of the coming of God's word (8:1, 5, 11; 21:3f., 22:14; 24:16). Many, however, think of it as the 'call' of the unknown prophet whom they name 'Deutero-Isaiah'. The MT's 'and someone is saying' is unexceptionable, hiding the messenger behind the message: the message is God's, the messenger is only the obedient vehicle. As to the message entrusted to this anonymous 'voice':⁷

A¹ General truth: humankind's transiency and unreliability (6cd)

B¹ Illustration: withering grass (7a)

C¹ The divine Spirit (7b)

A² The truth applied: the people are grass (7c)

B² Illustration: withering grass (8a)

C² The divine word (8b)

6 On *All men*/‘all flesh’ see verse 5. Grass is an emblem of transiency (cf. 37:27). Their glory⁸ (*hesed*) is characteristically used of the love of God in its changeless reliability. It is

^aThe St Mark's Isaiah Scroll from Qumran.

⁷ It is very common to excise verse 7c as a gloss. Westermann says it is 'The comment of a reader who was deeply moved'. North's 'rather prosy ... almost certainly not original' is as extravagant a comment on three words as is Delitzsch's 'genuine ... thoroughly in Isaiah's style'. The only solid argument for or against is whether the phrase intrudes on or completes the balanced parallelism of the whole.

⁸ For *hasdô* the LXX has *doxa* and hence the NIV's 'glory'. BHS alters this to *h^adārō* ('its splendour');

also the reliable devotion we should offer him in return but which we have not the moral durability to sustain ([Je. 2:2](#); [Ho. 6:4](#)). It is the enduring concern one might expect to find in another but does not ([Jb. 6:14](#)). This idea of moral steadfastness, reliability in the discharge of duty and faithfulness to promises fits this passage. Physically (like *grass*) and in moral character humankind is a failure. But there is more to their withering and unreliability than mere human failure.

[7](#) The Spirit (*the breath of the LORD*) who is ‘the Lord, and giver of life’ ([Ps. 104:30](#)) is also the Lord, and giver of death. There is a factor of divine judgment at work in the world, a visitation of death, for *breath* (*rûah*) is ‘spirit’. Figured by the abrasive wind that blights vegetation, the Spirit is the Lord’s mighty agency at work in the world, making real his personal presence in every place ([Ps. 139:7](#)). Not only does physical and moral fragility beset humankind in general but also even those of whom something more might be expected: the Lord’s *people*. Hence *surely* (*’ākēn*), ‘an exclamation to emphasize the unexpected’ ([KB](#); [Gn. 28:16](#); [Ex. 2:14](#)), *i.e.* ‘Why, even ...’.

[8](#) In contrast to this fading and falling—the facts of human fragility and fickleness and the dread judgment of God of which it is one aspect—there is a sure and unchanging reality: *the word of our God*, which stands for ever. (*Cf.* [Pss. 33:6, 9](#); [148:5](#); and see also how this note forms an inclusio with [55:10–11](#).)

The third voice: the arm of the Lord ([40:9–11](#))

The message to be declared in the homeland reiterates what has been already said about the Lord’s coming and his sovereignty. Verse [10](#), recalling the theme of verse [7](#), turns it into a message of comfort, for the ruling *arm* ([10](#)) is the carrying ‘arm’ ([11](#)); the ‘strong one’ ([10](#)) is the *shepherd* ([11](#)).

[9](#) $\sqrt{bāśar}$ is sometimes used of bringing bad news ([1 Sa. 4:17](#)) but here, as in general, it matches *euangelizō* (‘to bring good news’). Isaiah uses a feminine singular participle (*m^ebaśseret*), which allows the RSV translation, ‘O Zion, herald of good tidings’, and presents the picture of Zion receiving the news and running with it to the surrounding townships. On the other hand, however, the previous two voices were anonymous and there is no expectation that the third voice will be otherwise. More importantly, those commissioned in verses [1–2](#) were sent to Jerusalem, whereas now the message is going

[BH](#) has *hemdô* (‘its attractiveness’). There is no need to depart from the [MT](#).

out from Jerusalem. It is better, therefore, to understand the feminine participle as unnamed, modelled on Miriam ([Ex. 15:20](#)), the heraldess of a victory already accomplished, rushing to assemble a welcoming party to meet the shepherd and his flock (*cf.* [1 Sa. 18:6f.](#); [Ps. 68:11 <12>](#)). A *high mountain* is chosen so that all may hear, and the herald should *not be afraid*, *i.e.* entertain no doubts of the truth of the tidings. Already the returning Lord is in sight and we share the excitement of the threefold ‘Look!’ ([9g](#), *Here is*; [10ac](#), *See*). It is *your God* himself who as *‘ādōnāy yhwh* (‘the sovereign Yahweh’) comes in power⁹ (lit. ‘as a mighty one’).

10 The Lord’s *arm* makes its debut here in chapters [40–55](#) (*cf.* [30:30](#); [33:2](#)), the symbol of personal strength in action ([48:14](#); [51:5, 9](#); [52:10](#), note the ‘rolling up one’s sleeves’ metaphor; [53:1](#); [59:16](#); [62:8](#); [63:5, 12](#)). It appears far more often in Isaiah than any other prophet. The words *reward* and *recompense* are synonymous (save that the latter, *p̄ullâ*, can mean ‘work’ as well as ‘reward for work’). Where *reward* (*śakār*, ‘wage’) is used with a pronoun (as here) the pronoun is the person receiving the ‘wage’ (*cf.* [Ezk 29:18f.](#) where it is used of the victor getting the fruits of his victory). So here, the Lord has received the fruits of his victory, and the *recompense* which *accompanies him/is before him*, ‘in his presence’ is the flock of his people which his victory has won.

11 The change from sovereign to *shepherd* is not as abrupt as it might seem as the latter is a David motif ([2 Sa. 5:2](#); [7:7f.](#), *cf.* [Mi. 5:4 <3>](#); [Ezk. 34:2ff., 23f.](#)). This shepherd exercises general care (*tends his flock*), is watchful for particular needs (*gathers the lambs*) and identifies with concerns within the flock (*those that have young*). Arms should be ‘arm’ (note the balance between the ‘ruling arm’ of verse [10](#) and the ‘carrying arm’ here). *Close to his heart* is ‘in his bosom’, symbolizing intimate, loving care.

b. The incomparable God of Israel: the Creator ([40:12–31](#))

In style this passage is a ‘disputation’, an argument put forward to counter a position someone has adopted. The ‘position’ is stated in verse [27](#). The argument is that this position cannot be sustained regarding one who is the Creator-God, and the correct conclusion is drawn in verses [28–31](#).

Isaiah here uses the doctrine of God the Creator to assure the people of their security

⁹ ‘With power’ is *b̄hōzeq*, whereas the MT has *b̄hāzāq* (‘in the character [*beth essentiae*] of a strong one’).

and of the certainty that the divine promises will be fulfilled (this is the relation between verses 12–26 and 1–11). He continues to use the doctrine of creation in this way to reassure Israel of its special status (43:1, 21; 44:1ff.), of regathering (43:7), deliverance (43:15), permanency in the divine mind (44:21), redemption (44:22) and security of relationship (54:5). The particular stress falls on the Lord as the sole Creator. He is alone in the work of creation (12), needing the wisdom of none (13f.) Neither collective humankind nor the greatest aspects of the physical world (16) challenge his unique supremacy. As sole Creator he exercises executive rule in the world (22–24) and in the universe (26)—down to the small detail (*princes* and *rulers* in verse 23 and *one by one* in verse 26).¹⁰

The case stated (40:12–26)

The disputation is in two parts, structurally signalled by questions. Verses 12 and 18–20 divide off the first part, and verses 21 and 25–26 the second. Each part contains four stanzas (A-D) in parallel:

A The Creator-God and the lessons of creation

A¹ The sole Creator (12)

A² Creation and revelation (21)

B Self Sufficient in wisdom; supremacy in power

B¹ Unaided wisdom (13–14)

B² Absolute rule (22–23)

C Unique dignity and authority

C¹ Unique in dignity (15–17)

C² Supreme in authority (24)

D The incomparable God

D² God and creation (25–26)

¹⁰ The Lord as Creator figures widely in the following chapters. As Creator he is the God of universal sway with guaranteed purposes of grace (42:5; 44:24; 45:18ff.); the doer of all (45:7; 48:5, 7; 54:16). He controls the details of history (41:4) and is irresistible in purpose (45:9ff.; 46:11).

The sole Creator (40:12–17)

12 Totality is expressed by means of the opposites of *waters* and *earth*, and within each category by contrasting aspects, *waters* and *heavens*; *dust of the earth* and *mountains*. There is exactness of workmanship as God is said to have *measured* and *marked off*. The latter is from $\sqrt{tākan}$ ('to estimate the measure of a thing'; see Dhorme on Jb. 28:25), meaning here 'to adjust exactly for function'. The imagery is continued with *weighed ... on the scales and ... in a balance*. There is also the idea of easy competence in relation to the task: *the hollow of his hand, the breadth of his hand* and *basket*. The latter is (lit.) 'a third' denoting a vessel that contained a third of some unstated measurement. We would feel the meaning by paraphrasing, 'a pint pot'. There is only one Creator: the question-idiom presupposes the answer, 'None but the Lord!'

13–14 In Babylonian mythology, the creator god Marduk could not proceed with creation without consulting 'Ea, the all-wise', but the Lord works with unaided wisdom.¹¹ In both Babylonian and Canaanite creation stories the creator must overcome opposing forces before the way opens for the work of creation. To the contrary, the Old Testament not only tells the story of creation in a way that demands a monotheistic doctrine of God (Gn. 1) but also uses the concept of creation to point to the fact of only one God (Ps. 96:5). In verse 12 the Creator was alone in the work of creation; here he is alone also in the wisdom needed for the work.

13 On *understood* ($\sqrt{tākan}$) see verse 12. Here it means either 'to adjust' the Spirit of the Lord so that he would be 'on course' to do his part, or 'to gauge' what the Spirit was doing, 'to comprehend the mind of the LORD'. The *mind*/‘Spirit’ was the executive of God in creation: in Genesis 1:2 hovering in readiness; in Psalm 33:6 the agent of his expressed will.

14 *Enlighten* and *understanding* both belong to the discernment group of words (cf. 29:14), and have the sense of seeing to the heart of a thing. *The right way*/‘the path of judgment’ (*mišpāṭ*; cf. 28:26) is making the correct judgment or decision at the correct time.

15–17 This stanza moves from the work and wisdom of creation to the end result. Its

¹¹ See R. N. Whybray, *The Heavenly Counsellor in Isaiah 40:13, 14* (CUP, 1971).

purpose is to apply the view of the ‘immensity’ of the Creator which emerged from the first two stanzas, first to human collective strength ([15ab](#)), next to some impressive aspects of the fabric of creation ([15cd](#)), then to religious exercises ([16](#)) and finally to the totality of humankind ([17](#)). The creation of humankind, with all that is special about this crowning creative work, constitutes no challenge or limitation to the Creator.

[15](#) But how can a *drop* splashing from a *bucket* limit him who measures the seas in his hollow hand ([12](#))? How can the *dust* wiped from a *scales* influence him who lifts *islands as though they were fine dust*? On *islands* see [11:11](#); [20:6](#); [24:15](#). The word ‘*iyyîm*’ seems first to mean ‘island’ in the strict sense; then land lying along the sea, *i.e.* ‘coast’ and hence land accessible by water; finally it is used for land-masses (as here), parts of the world and countries in general.

[16](#) Here another aspect of creation *vis-à-vis* the Creator is raised. By inviting worship has the Creator (in Babylonian fashion; *cf.* [Ps. 50:9–13](#)) made himself dependent on what people provide? By no means! In fact, even the largest religious endeavours would fall short of his dignity—suppose all Lebanon became the fire and all its livestock the burnt offering! Yet before he ends this section Isaiah will have described, in chapter [53](#), a sacrifice worthy of God.

[17](#) This verse does not say that humankind is counted nothing ‘by him’ but *before him*, *i.e.* in relation and comparison to what he is. *Nothing* is ‘non-existence’ and *less than nothing* is ‘*eþes*’ (‘partaking of non-entity’, ‘extremity’, ‘terminus’, ‘the point at which a thing moves from being to non-being’). *Worthless* (*tôhû*) means empty of meaning and purpose (*cf.* [24:10](#)).¹²

Deity, idol and idolater ([40:18–20](#))

This is the climax of the first set of four stanzas. The opening questions ([18](#)) admit only one answer and then proceed without comment to point up this implied answer by exposing the pathetic inadequacy of idolatry (a topic central to chapters [40–48](#)).¹³ The

¹² It seems likely that in verse [17](#) the NIV has altered the order of the MT. The equivalents are given on this assumption.

¹³ On the folly of idolatry see [41:5–7](#), [21–24](#), [29](#); [42:8](#), [17](#); [44:6–20](#); [46:1–7](#). Up to [42:17](#) the argument is how senseless idols are compared with the glory of the Lord; from [44:6](#) onwards it is how glorious the Lord is compared with idols.

Lord created all things whereas the idol is the product of a human workman (19a), and its glory is only such as humans and the world (both elements of divine creation) can give it (19b). It does no more than reflect the resources of the one who commissioned it; by contrast to the living, active Creator, it is constructed to be immobile (20).¹⁴

18 'ēl (God) is the most transcendent of the God-words, connoting dominion over all (42:5), absolute deity (43:10, 12; 46:9), the unique God of Israel (45:14) and the God of inscrutable purposes (45:15). Contrast with this the ironical use in 44:10, 15, 17; 45:20; 46:6.

19 This is possibly an exhortation in reply to the question in verse 18: ‘To whom will you liken the transcendent God? ... An idol!—which a craftsman fashioned! And a metalworker covers with gold and with chains of silver a metalworker?’ *Idol* (*pesel*) is specifically a ‘graven’ or ‘carved’ image, whereas *casts*/‘pours out’ refers to a molten image. The mix of references covers idols of whatever sort. *Overlays* is the only verb in verse 19bc. It strictly means ‘to plate’ and, therefore, can only refer to the silver chains with some adjustment (as above).¹⁵ *Chains* (*r̄tuqōt*) is found only here, but cf. 1 Kings 6:21; Ezekiel 7:23; and Nahum 3:10 where √ *rātaq* means ‘to be bound with fetters’.

20 A man too poor is the participle (pual) from √ *sākan*. This is not the verb of the same spelling meaning ‘to be of use’ (e.g. Jb. 15:3), a meaning which does not suit here, but the verb underlying *miskēn*, meaning ‘needy’ (Ec. 4:13; cf. *miskēnūt*, ‘poverty’ in Dt.

¹⁴ Many consider verses 19–20 intrusive in the structure and unsuitable to the theme, breaking in on the climax created by verse 18 and (according to Whybray) misunderstanding verse 18, ‘which is concerned not with the folly of making idols but with the wrongness of comparing the true God with other gods.’ But structurally, adding verses 19–20 to verse 18 is the exact balance of adding verse 26 to the questions in verse 25. In each case the questions bring the preceding verses to a biting climax and bridge over into a further and final application of the same theme. In verses 19–20 this is that the glory of the Lord is in no way challenged by so-called gods; in verse 26 it is that the detailed rule of the Creator in history is seen in his detailed rule in the stars. The question in verse 18 does not in fact invite comparison of the Lord with anything but is an interrogative assertion of his incomparability. Finally, verses 19–20 are not concerned with the sin of making idols but with the uselessness of the product.

¹⁵ Verse 19bc is a beautiful palindromic or palistrophic line in Isaiah’s best manner: *w̄šōrēp bazzāhāb ȳraqq’ennū ūr̄tuqōt k̄sesēp šōrēp*.

8:9). But the point is not (as the NIV) to make a contrast with verse 19 (... *such an offering*). The MT simply has ‘one impoverished in respect of an offering’, insisting that in idolatrous religion the ‘value’ of a god depends on the financial state of the devotee. *Offering* (*tērûmâ*) is used of material given for a religious purpose (Ex. 35–36 *passim*). The god is not stronger, more lasting *etc.* than the earthly capacities of the chosen tree, nor more impressive, beautiful *etc.* than a skilled craftsman can make it. *An idol that will not topple/‘which will not/cannot move’* is the crowning exposure of uselessness—for all the discernment in making the right choice of wood and skill in making the best figure, the thing is designed for immobility! The idolater would suppose his idol to represent some supernatural force or being, but the prophet inculcates a true understanding. Idols may look magnificent, venerable and mysterious, they may excite a sense of awe but there is nothing there except the materials—no ability but human ability, no innate resources but those of earth. Isaiah reflects not the creed of the idolater but the monotheism of the Bible.

Supreme in rule and authority (40:21–24)

21 The questions in the parallel stanza (12) established that there is only one Creator God. The questions here insist that there are lessons to be learnt from the concept of a created world. Their root is in the doctrine of God the Creator, who in the Old Testament originates all, maintains all, controls all in operation and directs all to the appointed goal. Therefore, to believe in him is to be assured of safety within his world, to know that present and future are secure in his hands. *Know* and *heard* are imperfect (‘Do you not [in fact] know ... hear?’), *told* and *understood* are perfect (‘Has it not been told you ... Have you not discerned?’). The arrangement of the four is chiastic. The first and fourth belong together (the fact of knowledge arises from the imparting of discernment) as do the second and third (the fact of hearing the truth arises from the fact of being told the truth). Isaiah is thus not appealing to a natural theology of creation but to truth which has been made known (in this case by revelation from God). The objective communication of the truth (*know*) and the subjective ability to grasp it (*understood/‘been caused to discern’*) are both given. Israel has possessed this knowledge *from the beginning, since the earth was founded*, i.e. from earliest times.

22–23 The Lord who knew the ‘right way’ in fashioning the created world (13–14) presides over world history with the same consummate ease.

22 *Sits* and *stretches* (and *brings* in verse 23) are participles:¹⁶ ‘There is one who sits’ etc. This is the reply to the questions in verse 21. *The circle* is either the heavens or the horizon, both of which are circular to the observer’s eye. The greatness of God is seen in the minuteness of people, who by comparison *are like grasshoppers* (cf. Nu. 13:33), and the immensity of God, in that he requires the whole observable universe as his *tent* (cf. 1 Ki. 8:27).

23 The divine ‘enthronement’ (22) is neither a hollow boast nor an ornamental monarchy but a reality of executive rule. *Princes* (*rōz^enîm*) is probably from a root meaning ‘to be weighty, grave’ and hence refers to those invested with the mystique of position and office; and *rulers/judges* are those actually making decisions. They may seem to hold power but they are totally under the power of the enthroned God (cf. Jn. 19:10–11). At his own time (lit.) ‘princes he appoints to non-existence’, and judges ‘he has made of no further significance’ (*tōhû*; verse 17; 24:10).

24 Matching the unique dignity of the Lord (15–17), his actual position *vis-à-vis* world history is not simply one of superiority but of effective sovereign action. No sooner translates the particle *’ap*, which frequently has an ironic force which is suitable here: ‘So they are planted, are they? So they are sown? Indeed? So their stem has taken root, forsooth!—But then he blows!’ (cf. verse 7). Both *blows* and *wither* are perfect tenses preceded by *w^eḡam* (‘and also’): ‘but there is this too: he has blown and they have withered’—just like that! *Wither* speaks of the end of their floruit and *chaff* of the swift action of divine judgment.

God and creation (40:25–26)

These verses form an inclusio, topically, with the first stanza (12). The question with which this final stanza opens is identical with that in the parallel verses 18–20. The stanzas are also parallel in structure: the initial questions being followed in each case by an illustrative example. The relationship between verses 18–20 and 25–26 is well expressed by Psalm 96:5.

25 *Says* is ‘keeps saying’ (see verse 1). *Holy One* is the killing blow to any thought of a comparison! It is not only his power (12), wisdom (13–14), dignity (15–17), sovereignty (22–23) and authority (24) that put him beyond compare. Of far more significance is his

¹⁶ Cf. the similar introduction to the hymnody in Am. 4:13; 5:8; 9:5.

unattainable, unassailable moral perfection. *The Holy One* is here an adjective without the definite article, as though ‘Holy’ were another name for the Lord: ‘Holy keeps saying’. (Cf. the plural adjective as a divine epithet in [Ho. 11:12 <12:1>](#); [Pr. 9:10; 30:3](#).)

26 The words *lift up* are used of astral worship in [Deuteronomy 4:19](#), which was a temptation to Israel even at this period ([2 Ki. 17:16; 21:3](#)) and an immense preoccupation in Babylonian religion. But impressive as the stars are, they are creatures. They may bear names in their respective cults, but their real names are those by which the Creator summons and directs them. They exist and are in place only by his will. *Created* ($\sqrt{bārā}$) is the verb which the Old Testament (unlike cognate literatures) reserves for divine action (see [4:5](#)). Innumerable though the stars may be to us ([Gn. 15:5](#)), there is neither one more or less than he determines. God’s directive management is not only of the totality but of the individual (he calls them *each by name*). *Mighty strength* adopts [Q^a](#) but the [MT](#) should be retained (‘and as one strong in power’) to emphasize that this is no bare (lit.) ‘abundance of power’ (there is no ‘his’ as in the NIV) but a personal exercise of sovereignty. In relation to the fourth stanza ([18–20](#)) the purpose of this stanza is to indicate where true deity is to be found—not in the man-made idol but in the one who made the heavens ([Ps. 96:5](#)). In relation to the point of the disputation ([27](#)) its purpose is to bring the whole argument of verses [12–16](#) to this climax: the Creator God knows by name every item in his complex creation. How can he, who is the God of Israel, be accused of forgetting his people?

Despondency and renewal ([40:27–31](#))

As Isaiah envisages the message of coming disaster ([39:6](#)) taking hold of his people, he addresses himself to the despondency which will inevitably set in. Just as on the one hand, the great assertion of the glory of God the Creator ([12–26](#)) was meant to validate the promises of verses [1–11](#) so, on the other hand, it is now applied as a cure for the despondent heart which cries, ‘How can God do this to me? He no longer remembers me or cares!’ Having stated the problem ([27](#)), his solution is first, theology ([28–29](#)), in the form of a pointed reiteration of the doctrine of God—‘Do you not know?’. ‘The wrong inference from God’s transcendence is that he is too great to care; the right one is that he is too great to fail.’¹⁷ Secondly, Isaiah points to experience—resting, trusting

^aThe St Mark’s Isaiah Scroll from Qumran.

and waiting (30–31). Together, and in this order, they constitute the biblical way of renewal.

27 The use of continuous tenses ('keep saying', 'keep speaking') indicate a prevailing mood. *Jacob ... Israel* is a favourite designation,¹⁸ and possibly the sequence is intended to recall [Genesis 32:22–32](#) and how the divine wrestler gave a new name and new strength to the helpless, outclassed and disabled Jacob. *My God* is possibly uttered in a spirit of self-righteousness ('I have not changed; he has!') or of bewilderment ('How can my God do this?'). *Hidden* is in the perfect tense, denoting a settled fact (*cf.* the use of $\sqrt{sātar}$ in [65:16](#) of deliberate shutting of the mind), and *disregarded* is in the imperfect, denoting a continuous experience: 'my case keeps being dismissed' (*cf.* the despondency of [49:14](#)). The first question is theological, touching the nature of God ('He cannot see it'), whereas the second is experimental, touching the experience of people ('My prayers are never answered'). The reply comes along both lines.

28 The solution to their problem is to relearn what they already know and to open their ears to what they have been told (*know* and *heard* are both in the perfect; *cf.* verse 21). The people of God already possess the truth, and it has come to them from outside. Their God is such (eternal, Creator, untiring) that they need never doubt his capacity; he is also such (possessing unfathomable wisdom) that they must never expect to understand all his ways. As (lit.) 'a God of eternity' he does not change; as *Creator* he has all the glories, attributes and powers mentioned in verses 12–16 (see on verse 25); as not growing *tired* or *weary* he never has to abandon his purposes as unrealizable or postpone them while he rests. Equally, however, because he works on an *everlasting*, worldwide and ceaseless level, we cannot *fathom his understanding*, 'search through his discernment'. His ways belong to eternity, we to time; his vision is for the world, we are local; his ceaselessness keeps him always ahead of the point we have reached.

29 This verse opens with a participle. Just as the Lord's attributes include eternity, creativity, self-sufficient strength and wisdom (28), so they also include sharing strength. This is not a spasmodic or occasional activity but part of what he is. *Weary*

¹⁷ Kidner, *ad loc.*

¹⁸ On Jacob/Israel see [9:8<7>](#); [10:21–22](#); [14:1](#); [27:6](#); [29:23](#); [41:8](#); [42:24](#); [43:1, 22, 28](#); [44:1, 5, 23](#); [45:4](#); [46:3](#); [49:5–6](#). Very often this title points to the people pragmatically considered as an earthly entity, while 'Zion' suggests an entity in the sight of God.

($\sqrt{yā'ēp}$) is failure under life's pressures; *weak* (lit. 'the one who has no vigour or vitality') is the lack of innate strength. *Power* (' $oṣmā$ ') is related to the word for 'bone' and, therefore, has the sense of 'durability' and 'stability'.

30–31 The theme now becomes that of experience. Life shows that merely natural resources fail, but a different experience is possible. The two verses can be translated so as to stress this contrast: 'Though youths ... it is those who wait ...'.

30 *Tired* is the word translated *weary* in verse 29; *weary* here is $\sqrt{yāḡā}$. Both verbs mean being overcome by circumstances, but in the former case it is through lack of inner resource and in the latter through the objective hardness of life—unlike the God of verse 28! *Youths* is a general word for the young male. *Young men* is *bahūrīm*, which may be related to $\sqrt{bāḥar}$ ('to choose'), therefore 'chosen men' (those who catch the eye of the Olympic selectors), 'young men in their prime'. *KB*, deriving the word from a different verb has 'fighting men', 'men of military age'. Either way, the implication is of young men in peak condition—but even this has its limits.

31 *Hope* (with its biblical dimension of certainty) is one facet of $\sqrt{qāwā}$, which also includes 'waiting' (patience) and 'resting' (trusting). The participial form points to those in whom this relationship (of expectation, patience and trust) with the Lord is unchanging. They are promised renewed strength ($\sqrt{ḥālap̄}$), (lit.) 'keep putting on fresh strength', and different strength, a strength that is not natural, as if people should grow wings (cf. Ps. 103:5). The eagle is chosen as conventionally the greatest of birds (Ezk. 1:10; Rev. 4:7). They are also to be given divine strength. The natural person (30a) is not like God (28e) but the believer is, as the unwearying, unfainting strength of the divine enters him he finds inner resources that do not fail before life's demands. *Weary* is as in verse 30a; *faint* as in verse 29a (*weary*) and verse 30a (*tired*).

c. The incomparable God of Israel: the world ruler (41:1–7)

This section (cf. p. 298) is presented as a court scene ('let us meet together at the place of judgment'; cf. 1:18, 'let us reason together') yet the implication of the presentation is more invitation than confrontation. 'Islands' and 'nations'—the whole Gentile world—are invited to share in the blessings of Israel's God, but they flee rather to the security of idolatry.

A¹ Invitation: the nations called to the God of Israel to settle an issue (1)

B The issue to be settled (2–4)

- B¹ Who controls world history? (2–3)
 - in its initiation and objectives (2a–d)
 - in its process (2e–3)
- B² The Lord's claim (4)
 - in this instance
 - in general

A² Response: flight to idolatry (5–7)

The poem consists of six stanzas of four lines each, except the five-line fifth stanza (5–6). A¹ and A² are linked by ‘islands’ and ‘meet together’ (1) and ‘approach’ (5) (both from $\sqrt{qārēb}$). B¹ and B² have their initial interrogative form in common and ‘calling’ ($\sqrt{qārā}$). It is important to note that no names are named even though specific events are clearly in mind (2–3). In other words (as in chapters 28–29) Isaiah is discussing principles, in this case, the principle of initiation and direction in world history. The essential intention is still the comfort of the Lord's people. His promises (40:1–11) are secure because it is he who rules and runs the world.

Invitation to the nations (41:1)

‘Be silent before me’ is (lit.) ‘Keep silence unto me’—a pregnant construction, ‘Come to me in silence’.¹⁹ As is often the case in court scenes, the Lord is both judge (1) and also one of the litigants (2). On *islands* see 11:11 (with footnote) and 40:15. ‘Peoples’, as the less specific word, suits *lē'ummîm* better than *nations*. *Renew their strength* are the same words as 40:31,²⁰ not only forming a ‘domino’ link between the passages but also offering the Gentiles the same strength that is Israel’s privilege. This is the point of the call, which will be developed further in 41:21–42:17. It is at the heart of Isaiah’s message that the Gentiles are to be fellow-heirs with Israel (19:24–25; 27:13). The Lord, therefore, extends to them, in the envisaged pressures of life, the same renewal that is available to

¹⁹ Cf. 1 Sa. 7:8, where ‘Do not be silent from us’ is the equivalent of ‘Do not go from us in silence’.

²⁰ Some (e.g. Alexander) hold that the invitation is to idolaters to come before the Lord in such new strength as their gods can supply. Many (e.g. Westermann, North, Whybray) hold that ‘let them renew their strength’ is a mistaken repetition from 40:31, inappropriate in this context, and offer a variety of emendations. But were it not that the words are a repetition it is doubtful if they would have excited comment. They express a strong meaning in context.

Israel, *i.e.* by coming to him. It cannot, however, be done just like that: there is an issue to be settled, hence the courtroom terminology of approaching, speaking, meeting together and *judgment* (*mišpāṭ*, not ‘condemnation’, but reaching an authoritative decision). *At the place of* is ‘for’.

The issue to be settled (41:2–4)

2 An anonymous conqueror is described, and the question is asked who initiated his career (2a), is his master (2b), determined what he shall do (2cd) and how (2e–3). The oldest interpretation is that this refers to Abraham, either in his victory over the kings (Gn. 14) or in the victories of his descendants under Joshua. The former view gives a smooth transition to the reference to Abraham’s ‘seed’ in verse 8 but hardly accounts for the picture of international turmoil in verses 5–7, which would suit a reference to Joshua (see Jos. 5:1; 10:1; 11:1). Most interpreters find here an anticipation of the conquests of Cyrus (44:24–47:15), which were well known for their ease, speed and the panic they created. Any and all views can be accommodated in a passage which is designedly non-specific. That the conqueror will presently become Cyrus is obvious, but it is best to leave Isaiah to spring that news at his own time. Here his concern is only with the basic question of where authority and rule lie in world events. He will reply that all events originate in heaven, all individuals are stirred and guided by the Lord, all empires rise and fall at his direction: there is no other ultimate agent. Such monotheism and monergism is a pillow fit for the most aching head, a sedative for the most tattered nerves and a ground for trusting the divine promises.

Stirred is ‘awakened’ as if from sleep, therefore pointing to the first prompting to action. The situation is unmistakably Palestinian, where every serious turmoil had its origin in the *east* (see verse 25) in Mesopotamia, and every assailant invaded from the north, along the line of the fertile crescent. With *calling him in righteousness to his service* the NIV offers the correct translation of a line where needless difficulties have been found.²¹ *In righteousness* could well be simply ‘Righteousness’, a personification of the

²¹ ‘Righteousness’ (*sedeq*) covers human acts/states conformable to sound moral and spiritual principles, correct in the sight of God (ps. 15:2), and also judicial processes (Dt. 1:16), commercial honesty (Lv. 19:36) and integrity (Ps. 7:8⁹). When used of God it refers to his perfect justice (Jb. 36:3), the mark of his law (Ps. 119:7) and the changeless principle of right on which he acts for his

Lord, hence ‘whom Righteousness calls’. *To his service*’/‘to his feet’ is ‘to follow him’. Thus we have a statement that goes to the heart of world history and to the heart of our problem in trying to understand what happens. It would be unreasonable to imagine that the kings thought of Abraham as implementing the righteous principles of divine world government or that the Canaanites saw Joshua as acting ‘in righteousness’, or that the conquered nations welcomed Cyrus as the agent of God. They would have been as baffled and as full of the question ‘Why?’ as we in our day. But here is a strong and magnificent affirmation. In every movement in world affairs the Lord is the initiator, purposing and achieving that which accords with his righteous nature and policies. *And subdues* is ‘and makes him dominate’ or ‘so that he may dominate’.²² In *He turns ... his sword*, *He* is the Lord, *his* refers to the conqueror. The Lord remains in charge of the detailed operations of the one he has stirred up. *Chaff*, as always, represents the speedy implementation of the judgmental acts of God.

3 *Unscathed*/‘in peace, wholeness, wellbeing’ refers to the serenity and satisfaction of the conqueror compared with the havoc he has left behind (*zeb*). In order to support its translation of the second half of this verse the NIV imports the interpretative word *before*, which the MT does not contain. The picture is rather of one who travels with such speed that his feet do not seem to touch the ground, (lit.) along ‘the path with his feet he does not come’ (*cf. Dn. 8:5*).

4 The opening question reiterates verse **2ab**, but the thought at once develops from an implied reference to the immediately foregoing acts of conquest to a broader view

people (**Ps. 40:9-10**), vindicates them (**Ps. 4:1-2**) or enriches them (**Ps. 35:27**). It is also used as a personification (**Ps. 85:10-11, 13 <11-12, 14>**). In Isaiah it is used of human acts or states conformable to God’s will (**1:21, 26; 26:9, 10; 64:5**); judicial process (**59:4**); the character of the redeemed (**61:3; 62:1, 2**); the Messiah in his judgment (**11:4; 16:5**), his character (**11:5**) and rule (**32:1**); the Lord’s fidelity to his people (**41:10, 42:6; 45:8, 13; 51:5**), his character (**42:21**) and word (**45:19; 51:7; 58:2**); and as personification (**51:8; 58:8**). The RSV translation ‘victory’ somewhat overpresses the vindication references above, but its requirement of ‘at every step’ for *lēraqlō* is without exemplification in the fourteen other occurrences of *reğel* with *l^e* or *b^e*, which all mean ‘following/after’.

²² ‘Subdues’ translates *yarād* (an apocopated hiphil of $\sqrt{rādā}$). On the form *cf. Gn. 29:10; 2 Ki. 11:4*, and on the syntax see Driver, 64.

involving *generations*, and issuing in a principle that the Lord is always *the first and the last*. Both *done* and *carried ... through* are used ‘absolutely’, *i.e.* without stated object. The question is therefore quite general: ‘Who has worked and acted?’ With *calling* (omit *forth*) shades of meaning are possible. It can mean ‘to proclaim’, *i.e.* ‘to announce beforehand’ so that the outcome demonstrates who rules the world; ‘to call by name’ as in 40:26, referring to detailed divine providential rule; or ‘to call onward’, *i.e.* to the appointed destiny. All through human history the same has been true, the raising up of potentates and powers to do the divine will. *With the first of them* should be ‘the first and with the last.’ The pagan gods often belonged in the family tree of the gods, but ‘Yahweh has no genealogy’.²³ In isolated splendour, he is ‘the First’, but he will not be alone at the end; he will be ‘with the last’ (plural). He brings to its appointed destiny that which he has created, and at the end his creatorial enterprise will come to a triumphant conclusion. *I am he* is possibly, ‘I am the one who has been described in the foregoing, the answer to the question “Who?”’ But it is much more likely an idiom expressing the changelessness and self-consistency of the Lord (*cf.* 46:4; Ps. 102:27 <28>), or his unqualified existence (*cf.* 43:10, 13; 48:12).

World response: the flight to idolatry (41:5–7)

Invited to draw near to the only and true God, the ‘islands’ (1) choose rather to run collectively to idol-making. Incidental to this false choice, Isaiah pursues his polemic against idols, the product not only of human skill (7) but also of human fear (5–6). Unlike the Lord, the planner, mover and controller, idols are the product of the event, part of people’s defensive arrangements against life. Just as in 40:12–26 idols could make no showing against the Lord of creation, here they are equally pathetic in relation to the Lord of history. They are even more caught by the turn of events than the idolaters who made them, who have *seen* the advent of the conqueror and *approach*, but not the Lord as verse 1 invites. They turn to each other (6) and then together to idols (7).²⁴

²³ Whybray, p. 61.

²⁴ North urges that verses 6–7 belong with 40:19–20 as a single piece and that they were separated into ‘appropriate contexts’. This is likely and accords with the ‘mosaic’ principle on which the Isaianic material has been assembled. *BHS* suggests that they should be moved, and the NEB actually removes them, thus destroying the subtle editing of the Isaianic corpus.

Verse 7 (cf. 40:18–20) describes the pitiable plight of the world, which Isaiah will bring to a climax at 41:28–29.

d. Three pictures of consolation (41:8–20)

The foregoing passage (1–7) exposed the uselessness of other gods and the plight of the pagan world, but this was incidental to its basic task of ministering assurance to Israel. Its message is that the promises of the Lord (40:1–11) can be trusted because he is the world ruler, with every event and every actor on the world stage initiated and controlled by his bidding. The present passage brings this message of comfort to its climax with three pictures assuring of divine intervention: human hostility (8–13, the servant whose enemies are vanquished); personal weakness (14–16, the worm which becomes a threshing-sledge); and adverse circumstances (17–20, the desert traveller miraculously provided for).

The victorious servant (41:8–13)

On stylistic grounds it is possible to suggest that passages with three different origins have been assembled here into a mosaic of comfort. First, verses 8–9 form a unit of seven lines on the theme of the special relationship Israel/Jacob enjoys with the Lord, based in his acts and choice. The words *servant* and *chosen* (8ab, 9cd) form an inclusio. Secondly, verses 10 and 13 belong together in wording (the emphatic pronoun *I, do not fear, your God, right hand and help*) and theme (the fearless people because of the upholding God). Thirdly, verses 11–12 consist of four balanced lines, musical Hebrew of true Isaianic quality. In contrast to the surrounding theme of the servant who seems to have every reason to be afraid, it is rather the enemies whose hopes are disappointed (11ab), who come to nothing (11cd, 12cd) and who cannot be found (12ab).

A Introduction. The servant: chosen, taken, called, reassured (8–9)

B¹ The divine right hand, holding (10)

C Total obliteration of adversaries (11–12)

B² The human right hand, held (13–14)

8–9 These verses speak of Jacob/Israel's status as God's servant. Old Testament slavery/servanthood must never be thought of on the model of the West Indian slavery of the Christian era. Mosaic legislation extended protection to the slave and—such was the institution—had to make provision for the slave who loved his master and would not

leave slavery ([Ex. 21:2ff.](#)). Such a ‘slave’, as a matter of social status, may have been at the bottom of life’s heap, but in another sense he was as powerful as his master, for should he ever have been molested, it was the master the molester had to reckon with.

8 To be such a *servant* is a matter of divine choice ([8b](#)) and arises out of divine faithfulness. The divine pledge to Abraham contained a family principle involving an equal commitment to Abraham’s *descendants*/‘seed’, sealed in circumcision ([Gn. 17:7](#)). *My friend* is (lit.) ‘who loved me’. [Deuteronomy 7:7–8](#) says election arises from divine love, but it issues in responsive love ([1 Jn. 4:19](#)). The point here, however, is probably simply intimacy of relationship and its persistence within the covenant family.

9 To be such a servant is implemented by divine action. *From the ends of the earth ... I called you* is a poetical expression of the taking of Abraham from Ur and Israel from Egypt. It is a token of divine sway over all the earth and of the deliberate selection of this man and his family. Election is also expressed by the divine word (*and I said*), and is not a matter of wishful thinking or even of well-founded human opinion but a truth of revelation. The perfect tense *I said* illustrates the ambience of the Hebrew tense-form: ‘I said’ (at the time when elect status was first revealed); ‘I have said’ (and it still remains true); ‘I say’ (definitely, as a matter of settled decision). This election carries with it a guarantee of perpetuity. *Have not rejected* ($\sqrt{mā'as}$, ‘spurned with contempt’) is a perfect of determination: ‘I have determined not to ...’.

10 The command to abjure fear is based on the divine presence (*I am with you* is lit. ‘with you [emphatic pronoun] am I’) and divine personal commitment (*I am your God*). *Dismayed* ($\sqrt{\text{šā'â}}$, ‘to gaze’; here in the hithpael) means ‘to dart glances this way and that’ as if not knowing where to look for safety ([17:7–8](#); [22:4](#); [29:9](#); [32:3](#)). A further reason not to fear is the promise of divine aid: *strengthen*, *help* and *uphold* are all perfects of determination. Each is prefaced by the particle *'ap* which heaps up one thought on another: ‘Yes, I will strengthen you! Indeed I will help you! Why, I will uphold you!’ On *uphold* ($\sqrt{tāmak}$) see [Exodus 17:12](#). The moral rectitude and changelessness of God gives further assurance: *my righteous right hand* is ‘the right hand of my righteousness’, i.e. that which implements (the hand is the organ of personal action) my righteous purposes and character.

11–12 These verses are the centrepiece of this section. They form four balanced lines on the pattern, ‘They will reap shame and disgrace—all who are enraged with you!’

There is an a-b-a-b arrangement: the opponent's experience ([11a](#)); utter disappearance ([11b](#)); the servant's experience ([12a](#)); utter disappearance ([12b](#)). The whole opens with *hēn*, which means 'Behold' or 'Look!' (NIV *surely*), calling dramatic attention. The progression of opposition is traced from emotion (*rage*), through the formulation of a complaint (*those who oppose you* is lit. 'the men of your lawsuit', i.e. 'those who have a case against you') and engagement in struggle (*your enemies* is lit. 'the men of your struggle', i.e. 'those who actively oppose you'), to open *war*. As the opposition mounts, however, so does its ultimate ineffectuality: the anger 'reaps shame' ([11a](#)), the lawsuit fails ([11b](#)), the opponent vanishes ([12a](#)) and the enemy becomes non-existent ([12b](#), the same wording as [40:17](#)). It is a foolhardy thing to meddle with the servant of such a master!

13 This verse matches verse [10](#) and rounds out the section. The Lord's commitment to his servant is to be his God, to uphold him, to speak in reassurance and to help. *Takes hold* and *says* are participles signifying unchanging states. *Help* is a perfect of determination, here strengthened by an emphasizing pronoun, meaning 'I have myself determined to help you'.

The transformed worm ([41:14–16](#))

The second picture of comfort is of one essentially feeble who becomes dominant. The three verses are three four-line stanzas.

A¹ Weakness exposed; help from the Lord, the Holy One of Israel ([14](#))

B Transformation ([15](#))

A² Strength exercised; joy in the Lord, the Holy One of Israel ([16](#))

Whatever barriers ([15](#), *mountains*) may confront the Lord's people, they are not to be measured in proportion to the people's inherent weakness ([14](#), *worm*) but in proportion to the Lord's promise to transform (*I will make you*).

14 *Worm* symbolizes one hopelessly inferior to the task; inferior both before God ([Jb. 25:6](#)) and as compared with forebears and contemporaries ([Ps. 22:6](#) <[7](#)>). How can a *worm* remove *mountains!* *Little Israel* is 'men of Israel'; *mētîm* ('men') is often used in contexts which expose human weakness (e.g. [Gn. 34:30](#); [Dt. 4:27](#); [Jb. 11:11](#)).²⁵ The

²⁵ The NIV may be treating *mēt* ('maggot') as offering better parallelism with 'worm'. Driver suggests the Accadian *mutu* ('louse') (see [BHS](#), Whybray). This conceivably makes some sort of paral-

emphatic divine declaration *I myself* (the *for* should be omitted) stands in contrast to the exposure of human incapacity. On *declares* (*n^eum*) see 1:24 and on *Redeemer* (*gō'ēl*) see 35:9. In verses 10–13 the divine attribute was righteousness, fidelity to commitment and steadfastness of character. Now, however, and suitable to the inherent weakness of the *worm*, the Lord is *Redeemer*, the one who takes upon himself and as his own all the needs of his next-of-kin. The Lord in the fulness of his essential divinity, *the Holy One of Israel*, is the next-of-kin of his feeble people.

15 The Lord will act in transformation. First, the *worm* becomes a *threshing-sledge*. This was a heavy wooden platform fitted underneath with sharp stones and pieces of cutting metal which was dragged over the crop to chop the straw in preparation for winnowing. Secondly, this particular sledge is (lit.) ‘sharpened’ (i.e. prepared for the task), *new* (in prime condition) and has *many teeth* (lit. is a ‘master of teeth’, i.e. has notably efficient teeth). It is capable of threshing *mountains*, seemingly insurmountable obstacles (cf. Zc. 4:7).

16 Here we have another stage of transformation: the threshing-sledge becomes the winnower. This time it is not aided by the gentle wind usually desired for winnowing, which simply separated the straw into a heap, but a gale (the ‘forces of nature’ as symbols of divine agency) which removed it without trace. Divine power both transforms them (15) and removes the barriers opposing them (16). The people *will rejoice* [exult] in the *LORD* and *glory* [make their boast] in the *Holy One of Israel*. Joy, as ever, is the symbol of entering freely into what the Lord has done.

The needy sustained (41:17–20)

The picture now changes to adversity of circumstances and divine provision. The righteous God of verses 8–13 and the Redeemer of verses 14–17 is now the Creator (20), transforming his creation (18–19) for the benefit of his needy ones (17). Each verse is a four-line stanza:

A¹ The needy cry to the Lord, the God of Israel (17)

B¹ The desert flowing with water (18)

B² The desert abounding in growth (19)

A² The needy recognize the hand of the Lord, the Holy One of Israel (20)

lel with ‘worm’ but destroys the imagery whereby the worm crushes the mountain.

The Lord is the prayer-anwering God (17) and the Creator (20). In answer to the cry of the needy he makes a new earth around them—the motif is the exodus journey (Ex. 15:22ff.; 17:1ff.), the ultimate realization is the ‘new heaven and earth’ of the eschatological day, but the experience covers the whole pilgrimage of the Lord’s people (Ps. 84:6 <7>).

17 *Poor* (‘ānî) is crushed under the weight (10:2); and *needy* (‘ebyô̄n) is helpless before the challenge of life’s adversities (14:30). The search for *water* in the context (18–19) indicates the exodus motif of the desert journey. On the form of *parched* (✓ nāšat) here see GKC 201 (cf. 19:5; Je. 18:14; 51:30). The picture of need is balanced directly by the truth of a prayer-anwering God.

18–19 Water (18) and shade (19) are the two great needs of the desert-traveller (Ex. 15:27). None of the trees mentioned are fruit trees: the whole point is shelter. The imagery is Palestinian, for these trees would not be familiar in Mesopotamia. The waters involve a threefold divine act: innovation (water on *barren heights*; Ex. 17:1ff.); multiplication (*springs* where there was already water) and transformation (areas resis-tant to water, *desert* and *parched ground*, becoming what they had earlier countered). *Springs* in verse 18b are the places to which one goes for water; in verse 18d they (lit. ‘is-suings’) are the places from which water flows. Alexander notes that the trees men-tioned here would not ordinarily be found *together*, i.e. in the same conditions, which enhances the idea of a wonder-working act of God. *Together* can also mean ‘all at once’.

20 *People* should be ‘they’, a back reference to the *needy* of verse 17. ‘Together’ or ‘at once’ should be added after *understand*, matching the same word in verse 19 and giving immediacy and unanimity in recognizing that this must be the act of the Lord. The sight prompts knowledge and further reflection (*consider* is lit. ‘set the mind on’) leads to understanding. On *the LORD ... the Holy One of Israel* see verse 14 and on *created* see 4:5.

2. The consolation of the Gentiles (41:21–42:17)

Though containing a diversity of material, this section is a coherent whole. (See the outline on p. 289.) It is insufficient for Yahweh merely to make a claim to direct world his-tory (verses 1–7, 8–20)—all the gods would have registered the same claim. It is there-fore essential to offer some proof. Isaiah proposes a test case: to predict an event and then fulfil the prediction would demonstrate control of the historical processes. The

idol-gods fail this test (41:21–24), but the Lord succeeds. In the course of exposing the hollowness of the idol-gods, the plight of their devotees becomes apparent (24, 28–29) and a second question arises: If the Lord is the only God and sovereign in world history, has he no care for Gentile humanity in its desperate need? The answer is given in the link between ‘See’ (*hēn*) in 41:29, pointing to Gentile need, and ‘Here is’ (*hēn*) in 42:1 pointing to the servant who ‘will bring justice to the nations’. The Lord speaks in confirmation of this world-wide task of his servant (42:5–9), and the world is called to sing in responsive joy (10–17).

a. A court scene: the idol-gods are exposed and the plight of the world becomes apparent (41:21–29)

The parties come to court

The summons to court:

The Lord challenges the idol-gods (21)

The Lord before the court:

his claim (25)

The point to be tested at law

Can the idol-gods predict or act? (22–23)

The Lord alone can predict (26–27)

The judge’s summary

The none-entity of idols; the plight of idolaters (24)

Idols useless in word and deed: the plight of idolaters (28–29)

21 The address here is to idolaters, inviting them to make a case for their gods, as the invitation in verse 22 (*Bring in your idols*) indicates. *Says ... says* is ‘keeps saying’ (cf. 40:1). *Arguments* is ‘your strong things’,²⁶ hence ‘proofs’ (Westermann), ‘your case at its

²⁶ There is no example parallel to this usage of ‘strong things’. Ps. 10:10, ‘his mighty [ones]’, indicates the permissibility of allowing context to devise a suitable meaning. Simon accepts emenda-

strongest'. The Lord presents himself as *Jacob's King*, for the moment no more than one national God among many. This is the pragmatic aspect of Old Testament monotheism: while credally confessing only one God, the people of the Old Testament were (as we are) surrounded by claimants to divinity. Thus the Old Testament can say that the Lord is 'above all gods' (Ps. 95:3) without for a moment admitting their reality. The Lord here humbly descends into a sort of 'identity parade' of competing gods in order that the true may be isolated from the spurious.

22–23 The first verb has no stated object: 'Bring [them] near and let them tell us' is best understood (with the NIV) as a command to the idolaters to carry in their gods—with more than a sidelong glance at 'gods' who have to be 'brought in'! The general challenge is *to tell us what is going to happen*, and this is then divided into two specific aspects. First, can they *Tell us what the former things were and their outcome* (omit *final*)? The invitation is to explain the flow of history and the tendency of past events. *What* is the qualitative use of the interrogative pronoun *mâ*, 'What sort of things?' In other words, have the idol-gods a sense of history? Can they look with discernment at an event and say where it will lead? Can they foretell the future by understanding the past? Secondly, have they an absolute power of prediction (23)? This question moves on from the ability to discern the flow of events to the ability to control the flow of events so that a prediction reaches fulfilment. To answer these questions affirmatively is to prove *that you are gods*. *Do something*, with prefixed particle '*ap*', is like a snort of derision. Since *good or bad* is an idiom meaning 'anything whatever' (Gn. 31:24), it would be preferable to have 'Why/Forsooth, do anything whatever!' *Dismayed* (*šā'â*) is 'gaze in bewilderment' (cf. verse 10). The second verb is either 'fear' (*w^enirā*) or 'see (*w^enir'eh*)²⁷ with understanding, depending whether we follow the Kethib or the Qre text. Either verb suits the context. The verbs are emphasized by the last word in the line 'all at once' (*yahdāw*), which is omitted by the NIV.

24 The presumption is that the challenges (22–23) are followed by silence from the idol-gods, and the judge intervenes to sum up. This verse opens with 'See' (*hēn*), which

tion from '*aṣumōtem*' ('your idols'). This form does not occur in the Bible, though '*aṣabbîm* does (Is. 10:11; 46:1).

²⁷ The verb here is in a fairly rare cohortative form (cf. Pss. 77:4; 119:117). Q^a reads *wn̄sm'h*, the equivalent of *w^enišm'a*, 'that we may hear'.

links it with the matching verse 29 and makes it preparatory to 42:1. (See the outline and introductory note.) *Less than nothing* (*mē'ayin*) could be translated ‘partakers of non-existence’. *Utterly worthless* (*mē'eþa'*) is a parallel construction. The word ‘*eþa'* is not known but may derive from $\sqrt{pā'â}$ (‘to gasp’; cf. 42:14), hence ‘a sigh’, here symbolizing what is insubstantial and evanescent. Most, however, emend to ‘*eþes*’ (as 40:17), meaning ‘partake of nothingness’. *Chooses you* contrasts with verse 8. *Detestable* is used of that which is abhorrent to the Lord (e.g. Dt. 7:25–26); people become like their gods (Ps. 115:8; Je. 2:5).

25–27 The Lord registers his claim that it is he who initiates historical movements (25) and predicts what is going to happen (26–27). But Isaiah’s world was full of prognosticators and was avid for forecasts of the future. This raises a psychological problem of considerable dimensions if the Isaiah of these passages is to be dated within the Babylonian (and indeed the Cyrus) years. A bland assertion that the Lord predicts but the idols do not can only merit Duhm’s comment that ‘Deutero-Isaiah has not the slightest grain of self-criticism’. (See Whybray, who additionally remarks that ‘the prophet makes no attempt to be fair to the heathen religions, whose adherents could certainly have produced arguments in defence of their gods’).²⁸ Plainly matters cannot be left like that, for the prophet does not give the impression of paranoid delusion nor do his reasoned presentations allow us to think that he overlooked such an obvious rejoinder. For him to do so would mark him out not merely as one ‘without a grain of self-criticism’ but, much more simply, as a fool.

In the present passage, however, as indeed in 44:24–45:7, the preciseness of the Lord’s claim merits closer attention. It is he who roused the conqueror as if from sleep to do his predetermined will (25). The mind of the Lord lies behind it all. He predicted it all ahead of any event taking place (26–27). The word *beforehand* (*lēpānîm*) (26) always takes its significance from its context, sometimes (as in 1 Sa. 9:9) meaning simply ‘in earlier times’ but more often, ‘prior to some other event’ (Jos. 11:10; 14:15; Jb. 42:11). Either way, the implication is that the prediction here antedated the ‘stirring up’. In verse 27, taking into account the order of words, the most natural understanding of the Hebrew is not ‘I was the first to’ (this would surely require *hārī'sôn*, on the analogy of Je. 50:17) but ‘The first thing that happened was that I ...’ (as *rī'sôn* suggests). The con-

²⁸ Whybray, p. 69.

tention of verses 5–7 is that the idol-gods are exposed by the fact that they are only wise after the event; the Lord's claim is that he alone is wise before the event and has said so!²⁹

25 *Stirred up* is a perfect of certainty (*cf.* verse 2). Since this anonymous conqueror will presently become Cyrus it is not without significance that he originated east (*from the rising sun*) of Babylon, but came as an attacker from the *north*. But the main point is as verse 2. Those (*e.g.* Whybray) who import Cyrus into this context often urge that the words *calls on my name*³⁰ mean that he would become a worshipper of the Lord, but this is only one of the four meanings of the words *qārā' b'šēm* ([Gn. 12:8; 13:4](#)). The other meanings are: to name a person or thing for a specified function ([40:26](#); [Ex. 35:30](#)); to call into special intimacy ([43:1](#)); and to proclaim ([Ex. 33:19; 34:5](#)). It suits the words themselves and this context to understand that because the rise and career of the conqueror matches foregoing predictions, he will by his actions proclaim the name of the Lord. (See further [45:1–7](#).) In *he treads*³¹ on rulers the last word (*səgānîm*) is found in Isaiah only here (*cf.* [Ne. 2:16](#); [Je. 51:23, 28](#)). It is not a late word but is borrowed from Akkadian and means 'provincial governor'. *Mortar, potter* and *clay* are, as ever, a picture of sovereignty over an unresisting object ([22:11; 27:11; 29:16](#); [43:1; 44:2](#)).

²⁹ Whybray notes this point in his remarks on verse 1 and explains it by assuming the existence of predictions not recorded in the Old Testament. 'It is evident that the prophet's audience knew of such'. They might even have been 'earlier prophecies by Deutero-Isaiah himself'. Smart notes that it 'would be trickery on the part of the prophet to make predictions concerning Cyrus on the basis of reports of [his] character and triumphs, and then to represent these triumphs as proof of the power of Israel's God to reveal and control the future' (p. 65). This very acutely underlines the problems inherent in the Deutero-Isaiah hypothesis in relation to the argument from prediction. Refusal to countenance the prediction of a personal name ([44:28; 45:1](#)) necessitates a date within Cyrus's career and, in consequence, predictions 'from the beginning' or 'beforetime' must be explained by conjuring up lost prophecies. In the light of his stress on the argument from prediction, 'Deutero-Isaiah's failure to preserve them is a severe problem.'

³⁰ The [LXX](#) has the meaningless 'they shall be called by my name'; Q^a reads 'on/by his name'. [BHS](#) selectively combines elements from both with 'and he shall be called by his name', *i.e.* personally summoned by the Lord (as [40:26](#)).

³¹ The [NIV](#) and [BHS](#) have emended the [MT](#) (*w'yābōs*. Hebrew uses the verb 'to come' with a direct object ([28:15](#); [Ps. 35:8](#); [Ezk. 38:11](#)) in a hostile sense, 'to come against').

26 See the introductory note on verses [25–27](#) above. *He was right* is the forensic use of ‘righteous’: ‘He had the rights of the matter’/‘He was in the right’. The Lord is awarded the verdict, his case being clinched by evidence of predictive power. Each of these three lines begins with the emphatic and cumulative particle *’ap* (*cf.* [40:24](#)) with the sense, ‘Indeed ... Yes indeed ... Oh yes indeed ...!’ (*Cf.* the *’ap* construction in the parallel verse [23](#).) The first verb is general, ‘there is no informant’; the second (*foretold* is ‘made it heard’) suggests a reporter bringing a word from the god; and the third (*heard*) is the climax, there is nothing to report because there is no voice to hear! Yet Isaiah’s world was full of idol messages. The dramatic force is that he sees the idols reduced to silence by the evidence of the unparalleled predictive power of the Lord.

27 Commentators rush to emend this verse because the Hebrew is staccato. But, as Simon observes, this is evidence only of dramatic intensity: ‘The first thing, to Zion—Watch, watch for them!—and to Jerusalem, one-bringing-good-news I will give.’ On *first* see the introduction to verses [25–27](#) above. *They are* is a reference to the dramatic coming events. *Messenger of good tidings* is the participle piel of $\sqrt{bāšar}$, meaning characteristically ‘a gospeller’, one bearing good news (see [40:9](#); but *cf.* [1 Sa. 4:17](#)). Prediction here becomes interpretation, not just foretelling coming events but drawing out their meaning for the Lord’s people.

28–29 For the second time the court case is summed up in an exposure of the hollowness of idols and the plight of their devotees. It is not unmistakably certain whom Isaiah is addressing in these verses, whether the idols or the idolaters. But, following from verse [27](#), the one ‘giving counsel’ and ‘answering’ ([28](#)) could be the messenger of the gods (just as the Lord makes use of a tidings-bearer). The force of the verse is, then, that the Gentile world is without a sure voice coming from outside, without a veritable revelation of God. Verse [29](#) must be understood in the light of its parallel with verse [24](#) (see the outline above).

Verse	See (<i>hēn</i>) you are of non-	Verse	See See (<i>hēn</i>) they all are a delusion
24	pexistence (<i>’ayin</i>). Your acts are evanescence (<i>’epa’</i>). An abhorrence (<i>tō’ēbâ</i>) chooses you	29	(<i>āwen</i>). Their works are nothingness (<i>’epes</i>). Wind and meaninglessness (<i>tōhû</i>) their molten images

Verse [24](#) deals with the idol-gods, verse [29](#) with the idolaters. In relation to the Lord,

false (*āwen*; see 32:6) means what is untrue or delusive. Thus the idolater is involved in fraudulent religion, the trouble it brings and the personal iniquity of false worship. *Deeds/‘works’* refers to the idols they have made. On *nothing* see 40:17. *Wind* is an image of something lacking substance and dependability (Ec. 1:14). *Confusion* is ‘meaninglessness’ (cf. on 24:10, NIV ‘ruined’).

b. Remedy: the servant as the Lord’s answer to the world’s plight (42:1–9)

The parallel sections within 41:21–29 each ended with *hēn* (‘Look’/‘See’)—‘Look at the idol-gods’ (24); Look at the idolaters’ (29); and now ‘Look at my servant’ (42:1). The servant steps onto the stage specifically to perform a world-wide task of revelation, the Lord’s remedy for the emptiness, and particularly the absence of a sure word of God (41:28), which marks the Gentile world. The nine verses are in two parts: in verses 1–4 the Lord speaks *of* his servant, describing his task; in verses 5–9 he speaks *to* his servant, confirming his task. The question of the identity of the servant is not raised; attention is restricted to what he is to do. Looking back, of course, we recall ‘Israel, my servant’ (41:8), and it is reasonable to think of the Lord’s servant Israel as fulfilling the world-wide intention intrinsic to its election. But at this point the question of the identity of the servant is improper. Isaiah must be allowed to unfold the story in his own way, and his first concern is the servant’s task.

The servant’s task and success (42:1–4)

Justice (*mišpāṭ*)³² is the leading idea of this first Servant Song, pointing to the scope of the servant’s work, his reliability in its discharge and his perseverance through to its

³² From √ *šāpāṭ* (‘to judge/give an authoritative judgment’), the noun (*mišpāṭ*) by formation means ‘that which encapsulates/expresses such an act’, hence ‘a legal enactment’ (Ex. 21:1), especially a divine ‘decision/ordinance’ (Ps. 81:4). From this came the meanings, ‘decision at law’ (Nu. 27:21; Jdg. 4:5), the giving of judgment in a case (Dt. 1:17), the ‘case’ itself (Nu. 27:5), and so ‘right decision’ in almost any situation (28:26). The word also means the ‘right’ due to a person (Dt. 18:3), ‘right conduct’ (conforming to norm) of both people (Gn. 18:19) and God (Gn. 18:25) and ‘justice’ in the sense of giving someone his ‘rights’ (1:17). As legal decisions passed into custom, the word came to be used for what was customary or characteristic (Gn. 40:13). Finally, reaching back to God’s ‘decision’, it became one of many synonyms for law/teaching divinely revealed (Pss. 19:9¹⁰; 119:13) and thus God’s ‘truth’.

accomplishment. The word *mišpāt* is versatile, but its sense is plain in context. In the light of the foregoing court scene it must retain its meaning of ‘judgment at law’, the result of the trial between the Lord and the idols. The servant thus carries to the world the message that there is only one God. Another shade of meaning follows automatically: ‘justice’ summarizes those things which the Lord has authoritatively settled. It is a summary word for his revealed truth (*cf.* in verse 4, the parallelism between *justice* and *law/ ‘teaching’*) and its requirements. In this wide sense, the servant brings the truth of God to the world, a pointed contrast to their former situation (41:24, 28–29). The third appropriate shade of meaning is the righting of wrongs, the establishment of a just order—a prospect associated with the Lord’s own coming to reign (Pss. 96:11–13; 98:7–9).

The poem consists of three four-line stanzas:

A¹ The servant’s ministry of the truth: the divine relationship and endowment on

which it rests and its world-wide scope (1)

B The servant’s ministry to people: its style and objectives (2–3b)

A² The servant’s ministry of the truth: faithful, unfaltering, successful and meeting
the world’s needs (3c–4)

The first and third stanzas are verbally linked by ‘bring forth justice’ (1d, 3c) and by the universality of *nations* (1d) and *islands* (4c). The second and third stanzas have an interesting association in the gentleness of the servant to the *bruised reed* and *smouldering wick* (3ab) and his own imperviousness to smouldering and bruising (he does not falter or become *discouraged*) (4a).

1 The first and last of the Servant Songs begin with a command to ‘See’ the servant. Here, it is in order to understand his relationship to the Lord and the work committed to him; in 52:13ff., it is in order to watch him as he carries his work to success. *Here is* is an extraordinary translation of *hēn* (*cf.* 41:24, 29). Without identical translation of these three verses the essential link of the passages, and therefore the place and function of the Servant Song in context, is lost. The title, *my servant*,³³ says little about the person

³³ The Old Testament uses ‘servant’ to describe the relation of the Lord’s people to the Lord (Ps. 19:11<12>). Individuals describe themselves in this way (*e.g.* Moses, Ex. 4:10; Joshua, Ex. 5:14; David, 2 Sa. 7:19 [*cf.* the parallel 1 Ch. 17:17ff.]) and are so described by others (*e.g.* Moses, Ex. 14:31;

who bears it. It is mainly used of Messianophoric individuals like Moses and David, and this indicates its importance in the purposes of God. Its use with reference to Nebuchadnezzar shows that it can spotlight the function rather than the person. Without any qualifying proper name, it suggests here ‘my pre-eminent servant’, one who embodies true servanthood. *Uphold* ($\sqrt{tāmak}$) is a strong word meaning ‘to grip fast’. The Lord determines to keep his servant for himself. *My chosen one in whom I delight* is ‘in whom my soul delights’. The qualifying phrase is not superfluous; one might choose someone without necessarily approving or even liking. Not so the servant; he is the Lord’s man for the job and the Lord’s man for himself. What is done with the ‘soul’ comes from the heart. *I will put* is either a perfect of determination or a past perfect in the sense that the servant is depicted as already before our eyes (1a). *My Spirit* is the mode of the Lord’s personal presence (Ps. 139:7) and action (Ps. 33:6; see 40:7) and the special endowment of leaders (Nu. 11:16ff.; 1 Sa. 16:13). Each of the three ‘justice’ statements in the Song has a distinct emphasis. Here it is on universality—*justice to the nations*. *Justice* is the Lord’s truth and the truth about the Lord (see the introductory note to verses 1–4). The verb is ‘bring forth’ as in verse 3c: the truth is not something they search for and progressively find but something brought to them by a revealing agent.

2–3b In verse 1 we met the quintessential servant; here is quintessential service. It was forecast by Isaiah, exemplified perfectly in the Lord Jesus Christ, and is to be reproduced in all who would serve the Lord with true service. Such service is first unostentatious and unself-advertising. If a distinction is intended in the three verbs, *shout* ($\sqrt{ṣā'aq}$, ‘to shriek’) suggests that which startles; *cry out* (‘raise [one’s voice]’) indicates an attempt to dominate, to shout others down; and *raise his voice* (‘make his voice heard’) maybe suggests self-advertisement. But these facets should not be pressed; the intention is to create a cumulative emphasis on a quiet, unaggressive, unthreatening ministry. To this servant nothing is useless, even the *bruised reed* (however it came to be

Abraham, Ex. 32:13; David, 1 Ki. 8:24). The title ‘servant of the Lord’ is used of Moses twenty-one times and twice of Joshua. The Lord speaks of ‘my servant’, meaning the people of Israel (e.g. Lv. 25:42) fourteen times, including seven in Is. 40–55. He also refers in this way to Moses (six times, e.g. Nu. 12:7), David (twenty-one times, e.g. 2 Sa. 3:18), the prophets (nine times, e.g. 2 Ki. 9:7), Job (seven times, e.g. Jb. 1:8) and Nebuchadnezzar (twice, e.g. Je. 27:6).

crushed is not the point), which is useless as a support or for anything else. Neither is anything (e.g. *a smouldering wick*) too far gone towards extinction. The words tell us, as North says, ‘not what the Servant *is* to do, only what he *is not* to do. [This is] a fine example of *litotes*, and as such introduces us to one whose task is without precedent and can, therefore, only be described in negative terms.’³⁴

3c–4 The second justice statement (**3c**) emphasizes *in faithfulness*. The two sides of the word *'emet* are never far apart and here combine to affirm the servant’s faithfulness in his task and to his subject. His ‘bringing forth’ of divine revelation (*justice*, verse 1) is faithfully done and accords with truth. *Falter* and *be discouraged* pick up the verbs translated *smouldering* and *bruised* in verse **3ab**. The servant finds himself subject to the same pressures which have made others ‘burn low’ (*smoulder*, *kēhâ*), but he does not ‘burn low’ (*falter*, *✓kāhâ*). *Likewise, they are bruised* (passive participle of $\sqrt{rāṣaṣ}$), but he ‘does not bruise’ (does not become *discouraged*) in the intransitive sense of taking hurt.³⁵ In context, the intention is not to say that the servant will be immune from suffering but only that the pressures and blows that immobilize others will not deter him. They will rather find him with adequate inner resources (*not falter*) and with a resilience against outward blows (*not ... be discouraged*). *Establishes* ($\sqrt{s̄im}$, ‘to set or place’) is used in **Deuteronomy 4:44** of Moses’ ‘setting’ the Lord’s law before Israel. What has hitherto been the privilege of the few will become the possession of *the earth*, the emphasized word in this final justice statement. *Law* is ‘teaching’ (see **1:10**). *Islands* is significant here, indicating ‘earth’s remotest bounds’ (cf. **40:15**). An alternative translation of *put their hope* is ‘wait’. This leads Young to see the world stirring with expectation in anticipation of the servant’s coming. Alexander prefers ‘must wait’, for no other valid revelation will ever come their way. The NIV rightly sees here the world’s response to the servant: they will stake their future on what he reveals to them, having been won to his allegiance.

God confirms the servant’s task (**42:5–9**)

³⁴ North, *Suffering Servant*, p. 142.

³⁵ The form *yārūṣ* would seem to derive from $\sqrt{rūṣ}$ (‘to run’) rather than from $\sqrt{rāṣaṣ}$ (‘to bruise’). Hence, *BHS* emends to *yērōṣ*. *GKC* 67q shows that the *MT* can be treated as *qal* from $\sqrt{rāṣaṣ}$, and *Ec. 12:6* indicates that this has an intransitive as well as a transitive meaning.

These verses establish a pattern whereby each Servant Song is followed by a confirmatory comment (see 49:7–13; 50:10–11; 54:1–55:13). In the present passage the Lord confirms the world-wide task of his servant and pledges its outcome. The reference to the Lord as Creator (5) looks back to 40:12–26; his power of prediction (9) recalls the argument against idol-gods (41:1–7, 21; 29). Thus the two aspects of the Lord's glory which earlier exposed the plight of the Gentile world (they do not know the true and only God; they are shut up to useless idols) now bracket a passage declaring Gentile hope. The singular masculine pronouns of verse 6 are not explicitly identified with the servant but the implied relationship with the Lord is identical (*cf.* verse 6 with verse 1). Each passage focuses on the task of the servant, not his identity, and the task is described in compatible terms: the covenant terms ‘justice’ and ‘law’ (3–4) are summed up in the word *covenant* itself (6) and both passages stress universality.

There are three stanzas:

- A The Lord of creation: the Lord as God, Creator and life-giver (5)
- B The Lord of the servant: the Lord's world-wide purpose of covenant, light and liberty (6–7)
- C The Lord of the false gods: the Lord directs history, past and future (8–9)

Each stanza opens with a statement of self-identification (5a, 6a, 8a). The Lord (Yahweh) as God is Creator and sustainer of all (5); he has a beneficial purpose for the whole world (6–7); he is the only God, apart from whom there is nothing but *idols* (8); and he controls history by his predictive word (9).

5 In 40:12ff. the doctrine of the Lord as Creator was meant for the comfort of Zion: Can such a God, who originates, maintains, controls and directs all things (37:16), forget his people or renege on his promises? The same doctrine is now turned towards the world. Its implication is to raise a question. If he is the universal life-giver, has he plans for the world or only for the chosen few? The addition of the definite article in *God the LORD* (*hā'ēl yhwh*) is for emphasis, ‘ēl, ‘the one who is indeed the transcendent God’ (see 40:18), is immediately identified with *the LORD* (Yahweh). The four participles, *created, stretched, spread and gives*, describe the fourfold, unchanging relationship between the Lord and the created order. He exercises an ongoing creative activity. *The heavens* are at every moment dependent on the Creator to maintain them as his creation. The power which called everything into being keeps it in being; he is constantly in attendance upon

the earth in all its extent and productivity and ceaselessly ministers life itself (*breath*) and vitality (*life*/‘spirit’) to humankind. On *created* (*bārā’*) see 4:5. The extent and form of the visible universe is determined by the Creator; its stability is due only to his faithful work, holding it in place. Productivity (*all that comes out of it*) is a divine activity—not the work of the so-called fertility gods of Canaan but of the Lord the Creator. It is not the genius of scientific agriculture but the blessing of God who thus exposes the secrets he has built into creation (28:23–26). Even in the soil there is no life but the life of the Creator. Life (*breath*; Gn. 2:7) is not the product of a self-existing evolutionary surge but the direct act of the Creator; it is not held in perpetuity following an initial divine donation but enjoyed by courtesy of his continuing ‘giving’. *Life*/‘spirit’ is linked with ‘walking’, *i.e.* the manifestation of life in energy, activity and direction. Thus both life itself and the abilities which people show are his gifts.

6–7 Isaiah moves from creation to providence, the caring purposes of the Creator for the life he gives. Thus the question implied in verse 5 is answered specifically in the servant plan. The servant has been *called* ... in righteousness, like the conqueror (41:2), forming a deliberate link. The contrast between the destroying conqueror and the benevolent servant begins here, but each has his individual place in the righteousness of God—those earthly appointments in which his righteous purposes are fulfilled. *Take*, *keep* and *make*³⁶ all express purpose: ‘in order to take ...’ etc. The Lord does not call and then leave us to our own devices. With the call he purposed to accompany (*I will take hold of your hand*), safeguard (*I will keep*) and accomplish settled plans (*I will appoint*). *Keep* is $\sqrt{nāṣar}$, but an identical form from $\sqrt{yāṣar}$ would mean ‘fashion, shape’ (cf. 49:2). Either is suitable: ‘keep/appoint’ reflecting the providential preservation of the servant to fulfil the appointed purpose, and ‘fashion/appoint’ making him exactly fitted for the task. The servant will *be a covenant*, *i.e.* the means through whom people will come into a covenant relation with the Lord. In 49:8 the servant’s covenant work is directed to Israel (‘the people’ in a narrower technical sense), but here the context is a world-wide covenantal task. The *people* of verse 6 are those of verse 5 as the parallelism of *people* and *Gentiles*/‘nations’ (6) indicates. The *covenant* was Israel’s distinctive privilege, from its inception in Abram (Gn. 15, 17) to its climax in Moses (Ex. 2:24; 24:7–8). It

³⁶ On the form of these verbs as ‘first person jussives’ see Driver, 46 N4. Cf. 41:23, 28; 1 Sa. 14:36; 2 Sa. 17:12. Jussive with simple waw expresses purpose or consequence.

is God's free decision to take and keep a people for his own possession, drawing them to himself ([Ex. 6:2–7](#)), constituting himself as their God and Redeemer ([Ex. 20:1–2](#)) and bringing them into a life of freedom and obedience ([Ex. 20:3ff.](#)). The covenant, however, originated in Noah ([Gn. 6:17–18](#)), and its extension to the whole world is thus not a violation of its nature but rather its release to be true to itself in a world-wide salvation. The conqueror drives the nations to further idolatry ([41:5–7](#)), but the servant brings them to God. Within the all-embracing concept of *covenant* there is the *light* of truth, the healing of personal disabilities (exemplified in opening blind *eyes*), the end of restrictions imposed by others (bringing out *captives*) and the transformation of circumstances (*darkness*). They will be a perfected people in a perfect society and a perfect environment.

8–9 The self-proclamation of the Lord reveals him as a distinct personal identity with his own *name*; he does not exist 'incognito' in the world's gods. His *glory* cannot be shared. They may ape him, achieve a coincidental resemblance, but he is not there. There is an element of hostility in the situation. He will not ultimately tolerate the according to dead gods of the praise due to him alone. The distinction proved in [41:21–29](#) remains: it is the Lord who predicts and fulfils ([9](#)). The developing contrast between servant and conqueror ([41:1–4](#); cf. on verse [6](#)) is the key to verse [9](#). The *former things* are the work of the conqueror (the principles of divine action established in [41:1–4](#) are presently to be applied to the career of Cyrus) and the *new things* are the now-predicted work of the servant.

c. The new song: the world's joy in the Lord's victory ([42:10–17](#))

Many commentators understand this passage to reflect the world's joy over what the Lord will do for Israel (as in [Pss. 96–98](#)). They think of the rescued 'blind' of verse [16](#) as the blind Israel of verse [18](#) and see the journey of verses [15–16](#) as parallel to the exodus-type journey in [41:17–20](#). It is better, however, to understand the passage as a call for world praise in response to the world-wide work of the servant ([42:1–4, 5–9](#)). The same broad themes continue: 'earth' ([4, 10](#)), 'islands' ([4, 10, 12](#)) and the world's inhabitants ([5, 10](#)). In particular, the Lord's controversy with the idol-gods is continued. His refusal to share the praise due to him ([8](#)) is matched by the call to the world to give him praise ([12](#)), and his enmity against false gods is carried to its conclusion ([13, 17](#)). On examination the link between [41:17–20](#) and verses [15–16](#) is superficial. In the earlier passage Isaiah

used exodus motifs to assure Israel that divine beneficence would make the wilderness flower for them; but in verses 15–16 the acts of God are in the opposite direction, creating desert conditions (symbolic of world judgment), from which he leads the blind by a way only he knows. The true affiliation of verse 16 is not with verse 18 but with verse 7: the blind Gentiles are brought into covenant with the Lord by the servant.

- A Summons to the world to sing (10–12)
- B The ground of the song: the acts of the Lord (13–17)
 - B¹ The mighty Lord (13)
 - a¹ Divine silence (14ab)
 - b Illustrations (14c–16)
 - b¹ Pregnancy: purposefulness (14cd)
 - b² Devastation: judgment (15)
 - b³ Leadership: rescue (16a–d)
 - a² Divine commitment (16ef)
 - B² The fallen idols and idolaters (17)

The introductory section A (10–12) is bracketed by the inclusio ‘his praise from the ends of the earth’ (10) and ‘his praise in the islands’ (12). The remainder of the poem consists of five four-line stanzas (13, 14, 15, 16a–d, 17) and the two-line divine affirmation (16ef). Whether the material originated in this form or was brought into the present shape in order to fulfil its function as a climax to the section dealing with the comfort of the Gentile world it is not possible to say. The way the Lord’s first-person speech (14–16) separates verses 13 and 17 suggests a deliberate reordering of originally separate poems, but if so the insertion has been made with great artistry and effectiveness.

Summons to the world to sing (42:10–12)

In a balanced arrangement the whole Gentile world is brought into this summons to sing. There is the call to *praise* (10ab, 12); the pairing of *those who go down to the sea* with those who shout *from the mountaintops* (10c, 11d); a shared reference to ‘inhabitants’ (*yōše bē*; those *who live* [10] and *people* [11])—the far inhabitants of the islands and the near inhabitants of Sela; and a double reference to desert *towns* and *settlements*. Thus the whole Gentile world (10) narrows to the nearby desert of Kedar (11) and broadens again to the islands (12).

10 Always a *new song* (Pss. 33:3; 96:1; 98:1) responds to a fresh realization or a fresh display of the goodness of God. The *new song* here responds to the ‘new things’ of verse 9. The conqueror (41:1–4) provoked an international reaction of terror and a flight to idol-making; the servant provokes an outburst of song and a turning to the Lord. Even creation itself (all that fills the sea, the islands and the desert) is caught up in praise because, with the whole world now brought into covenant with the Lord (7), the bondage of corruption is over and creation’s groans are turned to song (cf. Rom. 8:19ff.). On *those who go down* cf. Psalm 107:23 and on *islands* see 40:15.

11 This verse refers to the neighbouring Gentile areas in Palestine. *Desert* is often used in the sense of open country rather than ‘wilderness’. *Settlements*/‘courts’, ‘enclosures’ are the temporary or semi-permanent protected camps set up by nomads. On *Kedar* see 21:16 and on *Sela* see 16:1. That Edom should thus participate in the joy shows that the Lord’s triumph is triumph indeed, even over inveterate hostility (see the introduction to chapter 34).

The ground of the song: the acts of the Lord (42:13–17)

This is a passage full of pictures and contrasts. There is the shout of war (13) betokening destruction and the cry of pain as new life is brought forth (14); the wrath which devastates (15) and the gentleness which leads (16); those who know divine favour (16b) and those who fall by divine hostility (17).

13 *Mighty man* (*gibbôr*) means specifically ‘warrior’ (cf. 9:6 〈7〉 ; 10:21, ‘Mighty God’). On *zeal* (*qinâ*) see 9:7 〈8〉 . The verbs *shout* and *raise* are linked by ‘*ap*, the particle of cumulative emphasis (cf. 40:24; 41:10): ‘He will shout—oh, how he will raise ...!’. *Triumph* ($\sqrt{gābēr}$, in the hithpael) is ‘prove how mighty he is’. Thus verse 13 begins and ends on the warrior note.

14 *Long time* is ‘from eternity’. ‘God is like a woman with child, the child being the “new things” that are about to appear. God has been eager and impatient for the day when the child will be born, but like every child it has had to wait until its time ... But now the time has come ...’.³⁷ Commentators who link the desert journey (15–16) with the returning exiles (see the introduction to this section) are understandably uneasy about the long period of silence. Wade can only urge that the Lord sympathetically

³⁷ Smart, p. 89.

exaggerates the seventy Babylonian years. Others push the period of divine restraint back before the exile began but without specifying the period or saying what the divine restraint was. But to link the period of restraint with the coming of the Messianic servant and the *new things* makes perfect sense even of an expression like ‘from eternity’ (cf. 1 Pet. 1:20). *Cry out, gasp and pant* are the characteristic sounds of labour. The MT adds (and the NIV characteristically omits!) ‘all at once’.

15 Contrast this verse with 41:18–19. This is a picture of devastation, the destruction of all that makes the world habitable. The contrast between uplands and river valleys; between food (*vegetation*) and water; and between *rivers* (water bounded by land) and islands (land bounded by water) makes up a picture of totality. On *islands* see 40:15.

16 The destroyer turned rescuer; not that there is any conflict in the divine attributes or consequent actions. In salvation he is as just as in wrath. According to verse 7, ministry to *the blind* was the work of the servant; now it is the Lord himself. This is the same ambivalence as between the Messianic king and the Lord in chapters 1–37. The solution of the ambivalence will be the same also as when Isaiah made Lord and king one in deity (e.g. 9:6 <7>), but we must allow the prophet to unfold the story at his own speed. In his ministry the Lord caters for personal incapacity (*blind*); overcomes ignorance (*by ways*/‘a road’ *they have not known*); removes barriers so that there is no hindrance to going forward (turns *the darkness into light*) nor any cause to stumble (makes *the rough places smooth*). On *have not known ... unfamiliar*/‘have not known’ see Jeremiah 31:22–23. It is hard to see how any can think Isaiah is referring to the return from Babylon. That was a way on which they needed no guide! Following three verbs in the imperfect, *will do* and *will not forsake* stand out strongly with their perfect tenses expressing an emphatic divine determination.

17 This verse matches verse 13, describing how the warrior God comes face to face with his foes and they fall before him. There are those who are led to safety (16) and those who are not. The explanation is their trust in *idols* (‘carved images’). *Who say* is a participle, denoting a continuing state, a character description: ‘being such as say ...’. Their experience will be to ‘reap shame’, and there will be no escape. The initial verb *will be turned back* is a perfect of certainty: ‘are doomed to be ...’. In a world of praise (10–12) there are those who suffer loss; when many know the tenderness of the Lord (16), there are those who cling to idols. In the long run the tragedy of their choice will

run its course.

C. The redemption of Israel

(42:18–44:23)

To know that the Lord must deliver his people (being the God he is) is a deeper truth than knowing that he will do so. For this reason, following the calamitous news of 39:6, the word of comfort (40:1ff.) is declared in principle. No names are named other than those of the Lord and his people. As Creator (40:12ff.) and Lord of history (41:1ff.) he pledges himself to keep his promises. Even the conqueror (41:1) remains unnamed, because what the people of God need to know is that whatever may eventuate in a threatening world, the Lord is the mover, and the welfare of his people is the object. But now Isaiah advances into the actuality of history. For the first time in chapters 40–48 Babylon is named (43:14), and the duress of 40:2 becomes the experience of exile. But 40:2 also speaks of iniquity and the need for pardon. These two sides of the initial word of comfort provide a paradigm for the section now beginning.

A National redemption (42:18–43:21)

a¹ Israel's spiritual failure resulted in national captivity (42:18–25)

a² The meeting of national needs (43:1–7)

a³ The Lord, Saviour and only God, contrasted with idols (43:8–13)

a⁴ Redemption from Babylon (43:14–21)

B Spiritual redemption (43:22–44:23)

b¹ The totality of Israel's sin (43:22–24)

b² The meeting of spiritual needs (43:25–44:5)

b³ The Lord, Redeemer and only God, contrasted with idols (44:6–20)

b⁴ Redemption from sin (44:21–23)

The coherent and parallel development of the two themes is obvious. It is, perhaps, specially indicative of the care with which the whole section has been edited to note

how the polemics against idolatry, while parallel, are each appropriate to its own context. Thus a³ focuses on the inability of idols to act in history, while b³ exposes their spiritual inadequacy, leaving the heart of the idolater unchanged.

1. Release from bondage (42:18–43:21)

a. Israel, the blind servant (42:18–25)

A call (18) goes out to deaf and blind people (plural imperatives), who are invited to contemplate the Lord's blind servant (19), who as the poem develops is found to be Israel (24ab), delivered up by the Lord as a consequence of sin (24cd) yet remaining without comprehension (25). The poem is in five parts. It fits so perfectly together and in its present context that it is hard to think it had any literary prehistory.

A Summons to the deaf and blind (18)

B¹ Two questions: the servant's disabilities (19)

C¹ Divine purpose contradicted (20–22)

B² Two questions: the servant's experiences (23–24b)

C² Divine discipline ineffective (24c–25)

The sections C¹, B² and C² are held together by three pairs of negative lines at the beginning, middle and end: *no attention, hear nothing* (20); *no-one to rescue, no-one to say* (22eg); *not understand, not take to heart* (25cd). C¹ is linked to B² by the vocabulary of 'plunder' and 'loot.' C¹ and C² focus on divine action (*It pleased the LORD*, 21a; *Was it not the LORD*, 24c).

The summons to the blind and deaf (42:18)

Many see here a call to Israel to recognize their own blinded state, and in the light of the description in verse 19 this could be so. On the other hand, hitherto the blind were the unenlightened heathen (7) who need the servant's ministry and (16) whom the Lord will lead to safety out of a world under judgment. It makes dramatic sense to hear a call to these same people here, as if the moment of their liberation had dawned and they were being summoned into life. That moment will come (55:1) but for the present it is in abeyance because of the incapacity about to be revealed in Israel the Lord's servant (19). What can be done for a needy world when the people of God are themselves just as needy and appear to have lost the clue to the saving remedies?

The blind servant (42:19)

The threefold reference to blindness where parallelism would suggest there ought to be two references to blindness and two to deafness has raised questions about the state of the text here.¹ But the MT is unexpected rather than unacceptable and certainly not without suitability. Blindness has been the chosen metaphor for spiritual need throughout verses 1–17, and it is not inappropriate to stress it in this way in relation to Israel. Blindness would thus make Israel's need identical with that of the Gentile world, while deafness would add that other dimension of culpability (ever the Lord's primary charge against his people) of failure to hear his word (see 30:9–11; Am. 2:4). *The servant* is as 41:8. *The messenger I send* is 'my messenger whom I send'. Isaiah (e.g. 44:26) uses 'messengers' (parallel to 'servant') in an apparent reference to prophets, but this seems to be the only place where Israel's election is described as a messenger ministry. The word will have been deliberately chosen as a picture of uselessness: how can a messenger carry a message if he is unable to hear it? *The one committed to me (m^ešullām)* is a participle in frequent use as a proper name (twenty-one times; e.g. male in 2 Ki. 22:3; female in 2 Ki. 21:19). Such frequent use suggests a known and established meaning.² The verb √ šalēm means 'to be at peace, enjoy well-being/wholeness'. The piel, as a transitive form, means 'to make peace', and its corresponding passive (pual, as here) means 'to be brought into peace, be reconciled'. This would describe very accurately the position of Israel before God and would explain the giving of such a lovely name to so many children. In the balance of titles, *servant*, *messenger*, 'reconciled' and *servant*, the first two express responsibilities and the second two privileges—and the failure of the Lord's people in both areas.

¹ Whybray notes the threefold reference to the *blind* as 'extremely ugly' while agreeing with North that the two MSS which exhibit a complete parallelism of 'blind' and 'deaf' cannot be original. Westermann wishes to end verse 19 at 'whom I send', the remainder being some sort of addition. But would anyone making an addition use the unique *m^ešullāmī* and leave the parallelism in disorder?

² Whybray ventures that Meshullam was Deutero-Isaiah's name. He does not explain why the prophet should describe himself as blind etc. His final proposal, however, is to emend *m^ešullāmī* to *m^ešullāhî* ('my sent one').

The divine purpose contradicted (42:20–22)

The paired negative lines ([20ab](#), [22d–g](#)) act as an inclusio. The heart of the section is what the Lord wished ([21](#)) and what Israel became ([22a–c](#)).

20 As literally as possible the [MT](#) reads:

The seeing of many things—

but you do not observe;

The opening of ears—

but he does not hear.

The change from second to third person is a frequent idiom, which by coupling an address (to the one concerned) with a statement (about him to others) drives the point home (*cf.* [1:29f.](#)). The verbal nouns ('the seeing', 'the opening') are infinitives absolute and, according to rule, could be translated 'You have seen', 'he has opened'.³ It is one thing to have faculties (eyes and ears) to receive information from outside, to receive and understand revelation from God (and such was Israel's privilege), but it is another thing to use them. The cardinal sin of the people of God is to possess the divine word and to ignore it. Note the same lack of perception in the two negative lines in verse [25](#).

21 *It pleased the LORD* (*yhwh ḥāpēš*) is the same words and word order as [53:10](#), the Lord's 'satisfaction' in what he wills (*cf.* the noun *ḥēpēš* in [44:28](#); [46:10](#); [48:14](#)). Righteousness is what fulfils his righteous purposes and his righteous character, it is the Lord acting for reasons which make sense within the divine nature. *To make ... great* is 'that he should magnify'.⁴ The subject may be the Lord or Israel. The 'missionary' task of the Old Testament was characteristically performed by attraction rather than by outreach, by the Lord's magnetic people. In [2:2–4](#) this is envisaged happening; in [Deuteronomy 4:5–8](#) it is promised. The Lord would display through Israel all the loveliness of his word and way, and thus the nations would be delivered from their blindness and be nursed by the

³ The consonants of the [MT](#) (*r'yt*) more readily yield a second singular (*rā'itā*) than the infinitive absolute the Massoretes direct.

⁴ On the construction of the imperfect verb without connective particle expressing purpose see [GKC 120c](#); Driver, 163 obs.

Lord into Zion.

22 But the cherished purpose was never achieved because Israel, who should have brought the nations submissively to the Lord (e.g. 45:14–25), actually activated the opposite, whereby the nations became dominant and Israel a spoil (cf. 2:5–9). Thus Israel lost its distinctive status in the world (22a–c) and its protected status before the Lord (22d–g). The Song of the Vineyard (5:1–7) was fulfilled: there was no fruit-bearing, no protection, no favour. It is only the revealed word of God and obedience to it that makes a distinct and blessed people. As far as the evidence goes *plundered, looted* and *trapped* cannot describe, even metaphorically, the experience of Israel in Babylon, where life was far from burdensome (see Je. 29). No prophet living among them could so speak, but a prophet looking forward into Babylon through the viewing-glass of the fall of Jerusalem could not speak otherwise (6:9–12; 21:10).

Not ‘Why?’ but ‘Who?’ (42:23–24d)

In difficulties we rush to ask ‘Why?’, a question prompted by the pride that claims ‘I did not deserve this’ and that assumes the capacity of the human mind to measure all things by its logic. But, as Job discovered, there are always dimensions of the human condition not amenable to present human logic, and there is no guarantee that to understand why trouble has come will comfort the troubled. On the contrary, the true question is ‘Who?’—discover the agent and through knowing him adopt a position of acceptance, trust and hope. *Which of you/‘Who among you?’* keeps the balance ‘Who? ... Who?’ in the parallel verse 19. Isaiah wishes to establish a testimony for *the time to come/‘afterwards*, i.e. the future. Again it is hard to see how Deutero-Isaiah, living among the exiles in Babylon, would have had this forward-looking concern. But Isaiah of Jerusalem would want to prepare people to be in a position to interpret unwelcome events as they unfolded. That the Lord is the agent behind events is the rigour of the Bible’s view of history and personal experience. It is not a denial or ignorance of ‘second causes’ but an understanding of the ‘first cause’: a realization that the Lord does not abdicate sovereign, executive direction when he achieves his purposes through others and an insistence that it is ever with him (and not with secondary agencies) that we must deal all through life. Hence moral factors (*sinned, not follow, not obey*) are the hinge on which life turns, not cleverness in manipulating situations and ‘pulling strings’. Thus Manasseh’s fifty-five years on the throne merit only eighteen verses from

the biblical historian ([2 Ki. 21:1ff.](#)), for of what ultimate importance are political astuteness, economic brilliance and military skills when it is righteousness that exalts a people and sin that brings disgrace ([Pr. 14:34](#))? Sin as personal affront (*against whom we have sinned [√ḥāṭā’]*; [1:4](#); [6:7](#)) has brought all the ruin. It is not surprising if the questions ‘Who? ... Who?’ express an element of doubt whether any will see things this way: unwillingness to see the Lord as agent and moral factors as decisive still prevails.

Divine discipline ineffective ([42:24e–25](#))

The diagnosis of sin continues in the people’s refusal to conform to his will (‘were not willing to walk in his ways’) and disobedience to *his law*, the contradiction of known teaching. Note how ‘we’ ([24d](#)) becomes *they*. Here Isaiah associates himself with national sin ([6:5](#)) but dissociates himself from national refusal of the Lord’s way and law ([8:16–20](#)). With these verses the poem returns to its starting point (see the outline above): the unfitness of Israel to be the Lord’s servant in the sense that [42:1–4](#) required. The lack of spiritual perception of verse [19](#) now works out in active refusal of the Lord’s way ([24ef](#)) and failure to understand what the Lord was doing ([25cd](#)). They did not recognize divine wrath behind national and personal experience, neither understanding (‘did not know/acknowledge’) nor taking it to heart, learning the lessons it was meant to convey. Looking forward as he was to the frightful experience of exile, Isaiah knew that not even suffering and trauma on that scale would bring a true change of heart (*cf.* [48:22](#)). For this a further and different act of God is required. But at all events, as Isaiah unfolds his story, we have now learned who the servant cannot be: a simple identification of ‘the servant’ of [42:1–4](#) with ‘my servant, Israel’ ([41:8](#)) is not possible.

b. Disaster reversed: Israel redeemed ([43:1–7](#))

With marvellous dramatic sense we are moved from considering the people under the fire of the Lord ([42:25](#)), and justly so, to the Lord promising that the fire will not burn them ([43:2](#)).

A¹ The Lord’s relationship to his people: creator, former, bestower of their name ([1b–d](#))

B¹ Outward bound: the presence of the Lord in every experience, the limitation of suffering ([2](#))

C¹ The Lord reviews the past: ‘I gave’ ([3](#))

C²The Lord pledges the future: ‘I will give’ (4)

B² Homeward bound: the command of the Lord to the whole world (5–6)

A²The Lord’s relationship to his people: bestower of his name, creator, former (7)

A¹ and A², three-line stanzas, are linked by vocabulary and theme: the Lord’s people have become his inalienable possession. B¹ and B², respectively four and seven lines, have contrasting ‘journey’ themes (*cf. Ps. 121:8*) and share the emphatic assertion ‘with you am I’. C¹ and C², four-line stanzas, focus the poem on the Lord’s love, which in the past redeemed at Egypt’s expense and in the future would not hesitate to pay any price for his people.

The Lord and his people (43:1)

The contrast here is not between present and past: *But now*⁵ (‘Now then’) introduces a divine comment on what has just preceded. Within the Lord’s covenant with his people there is wrath as well as grace, the curses of the covenant as well as its blessings, but above all there is the faithful Lord who will never go back on what he promised (*Lv. 26*). Though Isaiah does not use the word ‘covenant’ here, he is moving in its theological ambit when he refuses to allow the fire of wrath to have the last word. Even in his punishments the Lord remains with his people. The biblical use of ‘create’ ($\sqrt{bārā}$) points to such an act as must be ascribed to God, proceeding from his free determination that it should be so. In creation itself, the Lord originates, maintains, controls, directs (43:15); his relationship to his people is the same. *Formed* ($\sqrt{yāṣar}$) is more intimate (Gn. 2:7), indicating painstaking care whereby every circumstance of life is weighed and measured to give exactly the right pressure of the potter’s hand so that the finished vessel will match his specifications. More intimate still is *redeemed* ($\sqrt{gā'al}$; 35:9; 41:14), the Lord’s deliberate acceptance of all the rights of the next-of-kin, making the needs of his helpless ‘relative’ his own. Finally, in a crowning intimacy, there is naming; ‘to call by name’ (40:26) is a direct personal relationship involving having a specific plan and place

⁵ The use of *w^eattâ* in 49:5 following a ‘lament’ leads some to suppose that this passage is not in its original place. But this is to suppose that the word is a technical term which can only be used in lamentation contexts. This cannot be proved. But even if it could, it would not counter the evidence provided by the diagrammatic outline that each segment of the present section is exactly in the right place.

for the one named. In Israel's case (7) 'calling by name' included 'being called by my name' (cf. 4:1). Like a true and glad-hearted Boaz (Ru. 4:3–10), the Lord redeemed and married his Israel. Hence the triumphant shout *You are mine! / Mine you are!*

The first journey (43:2)

Many commentators urge that this verse describes the journey home from exile, but this is by no means obvious. First, the terms of extreme hardship suggest rigours and dangers imposed on captives enduring deportation. *Fire* is a more likely symbol of divine and enemy hostility than an experience chanced upon by those whose troubles are in the past. In 47:2, 'passing through waters' is the lot of those leaving home for exile. Secondly, when Isaiah speaks of the homeward road he does so in terms of transformed nature, ministering to the needs of the travellers (43:14, 19–21; 48:20–21). The sequence from 42:18–25 is far better served by understanding that the justified divine wrath of verse 25 issues in the consigning of the people to the hard road of the captive, but even when under his wrath they can still lean on those changeless realities which make them his protected, cherished people. Within each category of trial the movement is from general to specific (from *waters* to *rivers*, from *fire* to *flame*). The contrast between *water* and *fire* is an idiom of totality: trials of whatever sort and however they come. In all there is the Lord's presence ('with you am I') and the Lord's control, a divine 'thus far and no further' (cf. Jb. 1:12, 2:6), waters without drowning, fire without burning up.

The past (43:3)

The promises of verse 2 are 'earthed' in who the Lord is (3ab) and what he has already done for his people (3cd). *The LORD, your God* is the exodus title (Ex. 20:2), and it prepares for the reference to Egypt and is the foundation name and title of Israel's God (Ex. 3:15). *Your God* is not 'the God you have chosen' but 'the God who has chosen you' (43:10). *The Holy One of Israel* is Isaiah's special title for the Lord, combining the full reality of divine holiness with the equal reality of his relationship to Israel. In context it is full of comfort, for though holiness has blazed into wrath the relationship remains. If his holiness and their sinfulness did not militate against forming the relationship then it cannot militate against its continuance. The root idea of deliverance behind *Saviour* (cf. 25:9) points up the message of comfort. The NIV and many others understand the perfect tense of *I give* as either a perfect representing something changeless in the divine

character ('God's beloved Israel ... has a *gō'ēl* who will pay any price, even the whole of Africa');⁶ or a perfect of certainty ('I will surely give') looking forward to the expected conquest of Egypt and beyond, by Cyrus. But this overlooks the contrast between verses 3 and 4, the 'I gave' and the 'I will give' (see the outline above). Rather, therefore, we should allow the titles of the Lord (3ab) to reach their natural target in the exodus wherein it was at the expense of Egypt (Ex. 10:7) that Israel was chosen and liberated. *Ransom* (*kōper*) is the price to be paid (see 6:7). *Cush* and *Seba* refer to the extreme south of Egypt and lands lying further south and are a poetical elaboration of the picture. *In your stead* is exactly right for *tahteykā*, the word for a son taking his father's place on the throne (1 Ki. 11:43), for the substitutionary relationship between offering and person (Gn. 22:13) and for the equivalence between crime and punishment (Ex. 21:23). It carries the sense of exact equivalence.

The future (43:4)

Since is 'as a result of the fact that'. *Precious*, *honoured* and *love* are all perfect tenses signifying here the past which continues into the present: 'have been and still are'. They speak of the value the Lord sees in his people (*precious*: cf. Eph. 1:18), the dignity (*honoured*) he has conferred in calling them his, and the *love* (Dt. 7:7–8) which undergirds all. This love is part of the unchanging nature of God and thus guarantees the continuing relationship come what may. *I will give* may have the same meaning as in verse 3, or perhaps, hypothetically, 'I would give'—should the situation arise on the exodus pattern and in order to deliver his people the Lord must consign all others to loss (*men* is '*adām*', 'humankind'), he is ready to make the choice. Isaiah will presently show us what choice the Lord did make in such an eventuality (chapter 53), and after that we must await the New Testament to spell out the full reality (see Jn. 3:16; Rom. 5:8). *In exchange* is 'instead of' (see verse 3).

The second journey (43:5–6)

The pledge to give 'humankind' if necessary is now given a context: the Lord's people scattered world-wide. Just as once the choice was between the captor, Egypt and the threatened Israel, so if the world were to turn captor, Israel would still be chosen, for such is the Lord's love for his people. Isaiah is therefore looking far beyond any threat

⁶ Smart, p. 97.

that Babylon might impose. The Babylonian exile was in principle no greater than the Egyptian sojourn and in practice was much more tolerable and less threatening. A call to return from Babylon would not involve divine addresses to the four cardinal compass points. Smart notes that this world-wide regathering presupposes ‘at least in imagination’ a Palestinian viewpoint. To confine these expectations to the return from Babylon ‘reduces his high-flown eschatological conceptions to banality’.⁷ Isaiah rarely, if ever, comes to grips with history without launching out into those visions which for him are the final solution to the historical predicaments of God’s people. So it is here. He is about to mention Babylon (14) but in case his hearers should cherish wrong views about that deliverance (*cf.* Lk. 19:11) he draws the curtain further back to expose a world-wide regathering. *I will bring your children ... I will gather you* indicates the continuity of the people of the eschatological day with those to whom Isaiah spoke. *My sons, my daughters* indicates the continuing relationship with the Lord, grounded in redemption (Ex. 4:21).

The Lord and his people (43:7)

The poem comes full circle (see verse 1). Just as their special relationship offers security in impending trouble (1–4), so it now affirms the certainty of future hopes (4–7). *Everyone* concludes the series of descriptions of those whom the Lord will gather: ‘Your children’/seed’ (5) is their membership of the Lord’s people; ‘my sons’ (6), their position as redeemed; *everyone*, the individuality of divine choice of those upon whom he will set his name (*cf.* 4:3, *all who are recorded among the living*/‘everyone who is written unto life’). On *created, formed* and *name* see verse 1. *And made* includes the particle *’ap*: ‘yes indeed, made’ (see 40:24; 41:23). ‘Making’ is part of the vocabulary of creation. In *Genesis 1* it is used of the work of the Creator giving perfect expression to his creative designs, bringing the acts of creation to their intended concrete expression. So it is also used of the Lord’s providential dealings with Israel, his ongoing implementation of his original creative choice of them.

c. The certainty of what the Lord has promised (43:8–13)

Isaiah uses again a favourite literary form, the courtroom drama. The fundamental point behind this figure is that what he asserts are not fables but truths tested and

⁷ Smart, p. 97.

attested at law, verified conclusions based on firm evidence. At first sight it would seem that the issue to be contested is whether, like the Lord, the idol-gods can predict and fulfil their predictions. As we listen to the proceedings, however, this issue begins to recede and to be replaced by a question about which of all the claimant gods can act (*cf.* 41:23de) and which has the sovereign capacity to determine on a course of action and see it through. Thus verses 11 and 13 major on the only God as Saviour, sovereign in power ('No-one can deliver'), the irresistible worker.

A¹The court assembled (8–9b)

B¹ The issue announced (9c–f)

C¹The Lord's witnesses (10a–d)

C²The Lord's claim (10e–11b)

B² The issue settled (12)

A²The verdict (13)

A¹ and A² belong together as the opening and closing scenes in court. B¹ and B² address a question to the idol-gods and then give the Lord's answer as if the same question were addressed to him. They share the vocabulary of telling, proclaiming and 'their witnesses ... my witnesses'. C¹ and C² belong together thematically: in C¹ the Lord calls his witnesses; in C² he witnesses on his own behalf, for his chosen servant and witness is blind and deaf (8)! The passage thus exposes further the spiritual state of Israel and the impossibility of the nation being the servant.

The court assembling (43:8–9b)

The parties to the action gather in court. One party is composed of the *blind* and *deaf* (*cf.* 42:18), the other is an international group.

8 Translations and commentaries concur in requiring an imperative (*Lead out*) here, whereas the MT has a perfect, 'He has brought out'.⁸ The change to imperative is acceptable enough (the call of the court usher) but is nowhere near the pathos of the perfect. Isaiah acts like a court reporter (as also in verse 9ab), watching the litigants coming in and recording (with astonishment) 'he has brought out the blind and the deaf—as his

⁸ GKC 53m notes this verse and Ps. 94:1 as anomalous imperatives. Q^a reads a plural imperative. BHS suggests a singular imperative. Behind all this lies the assumption that the passage requires an imperative, but this is not the case.

witnesses!'. Westermann marvels that the Lord can indeed use such, but this is not the point. Rather, relying on such testimony, he is bound to lose the case, for what court accepts the testimony of the blind to what they have seen or of the deaf to what they have heard? Therefore, though the Lord seeks to prompt his people to their duty of testimony by reiterating 'You are my witnesses' (10, 12) he has, in fact, to bear his own testimony in default of theirs (10–11). This is not a natural but a culpable deficiency for they *have eyes and ears*, *i.e.* they had been granted faculties of spiritual perception but have contracted blindness and deafness by constant refusal to see and hear (6:9ff; 29:9). It is grimly sad that those who worship false gods and no-gods often rise above what their religion inspires but the people of the true God live below their dignity and fail the God who has illuminated them.

The issue announced (43:9c–f)

The voice is that of the presiding judge. As suggested in the introductory note above, behind the apparent challenge to predict lies the question: Who is the God of action? Those who understood verses 1–7 as entirely concerned with future events (see especially on verse 3) make *this* refer to the coming events of Cyrus and think of the *former/first things* as a broad request for earlier predictions made by the idol-gods in any matter whatever. But if verse 3 refers to the past event of the exodus then both *this* and *former* have the same reference: 'Who among them can tell this, that is let us hear the first things?' The exodus redemption was the 'first' act of the Lord specifically for Israel. Have the false gods any similar act to their credit? (See further on verses 12–13.) This sovereign capacity to determine what he shall do and to do it without let or hindrance is the true mark of deity. The verbs 'tell' (*foretold*) and 'let hear' (*proclaimed*) are respectively singular (*i.e.* referring to any individual god) and plural (*i.e.* referring to all of them together). *Right* is the legal use of 'righteous', meaning 'are in the right/vindicated'. *So that others may hear* is 'and let them hear'—the president gestures to the jury or those in the court room who would register the evidence and agree the verdict.

The Lord's witnesses (43:10a–d)

Declares (n^eum; see 1:24) is (lit.) '[it is] the word of'. The conjunction *and* before *my servant* can be interpreted as 'that is': servant status carries the responsibility of witness. The nation had been given this status with the specific intention (*so that*) of being brought to *know* the truth and so to *believe* and come to *understand* ($\sqrt{b}in$, 'discern-

ment’, ‘seeing to the heart of a matter’) that the Lord is unique. The construction behind *believe me* (*ha’āmîn lē*) mostly means ‘to believe what someone says’ ([Gn. 45:26](#)) but includes the idea of trusting the person ([Dt. 9:23](#)). Faith arises out of facts and issues in insight. On *I am he* see [41:4](#). In answer to the question in verse [9](#), ‘Which among them?’ the Lord replies ‘I am the one’, but as ever the formula contains the truth of the changeless self-consistency of the Lord and is resonant of the ‘I am’ of [Exodus 3:14](#).

The Lord’s claim (43:10e–11)

The prompting ([10a](#)) that *You are my witnesses* has apparently been met by silence on the part of the blind and deaf. The Lord must become solely responsible for his own case. His contention covers his being ([10ef](#)) and his work ([11](#)).

10ef The gods of the pagan world were often spoken of as *formed*, created, coming into being or standing in genealogical relationship to each other. The Lord proceeds from none and is succeeded by none, existing from the beginning, without superior or inferior, one only God. Not only so but ([11](#)) he is the only *saviour*. The exodus events are clearly in the background of verse [11](#): the proclamation of the name ([Ex. 3:14–15](#); [33:19–34:8](#)) and the work of salvation—deliverance.

The issue settled (43:12)

The verse begins (lit.) ‘It is I who have declared [the *foretold* of verse [9](#)] and saved and made it heard [*proclaimed*, verse [9](#)]’. What the idols cannot do, the Lord has done. The sequence of verbs, ‘declared … saved … made to hear’, is important. In the Bible, truth does not ‘emerge’ as people wrestle to understand the acts of God. Rather, as in [Exodus 3–4](#), divine speech comes first, setting out what the coming events will be and what they will mean. This is then followed, after the events, by further and deeper divine exposition brought to the people of God through divinely authorized interpreters. *Not some foreign god/*‘and there was no stranger among you’ (as [1 Ki. 3:18](#) [AV] ‘there was no stranger with us’) is a denial of the possibility of any other agency, human or divine. Note again the pathos of the divine prompting to the blind and deaf who are *my witnesses*. *Declares* is as in verse [10](#). *God* (‘*ēl*’) is God in the highest, the transcendent God.

The verdict (43:13)

Once more in default of his witnesses stepping forward, the Lord must engage in self-proclamation but, in keeping with the court scene, he casts himself into the role of pre-

siding judge and announces the verdict. 13a recapitulates verse 10d–f and 13bc recapitulates verse 11. The verdict goes in favour of the Lord in his being and in his work. There are three possible meanings of *gam miyyôm* (*Yes, and from ancient days*): ‘Indeed since time began’; ‘Today also’, *i.e.* not just in the past, at the exodus; and ‘Henceforth too’ (*cf.* Ezk. 48:35). Thus it is a most comprehensive claim to sole deity. *I am he* (see verse 10d) is here possibly emphasizing ‘I remain the same’. *Who can deliver* indicates the sovereignty of the Lord in deciding what shall happen to people; *Who can reverse* points to his sovereignty in determining the course of events.

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

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

A The promise (14–15)

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

B The pattern (16–21)

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

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

Babylon overthrown (43:14–15)

The bracketing divine epithets (a¹, a² above) share the thought of holiness and add,