

b. Appeal and reassurance (51:9–16)

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

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

Four elements in these verses point to the exodus as the past event referred to: (i) the making of *a road in the depths* echoes the Red Sea experience; (ii) *the redeemed*, when it refers to a past experience, describes those who came out of Egypt; (iii) the only historical event which prefigures eschatological redemption is the exodus (Ezk. 20:33f.); (iv) *Rahab* is used as a code-name for Egypt. Isaiah 30:7 uses the name Rahab in a way which requires that it was common currency, and Psalm 87:4 probably reflects a well-established cultic usage. Likewise, the reference to the *monster* is reminiscent of the cultic credo in Psalm 74:12f., and Ezekiel 29:3 and 32:2 are explicit in connecting ‘the monster’ with the exodus.

Before we can examine the details of the verses we must ask why Isaiah refers to the exodus in such coded terms. For *Rahab*, the *monster*/‘dragon’, *the great deep* and *the depths of the sea* bring us into the heart of Canaanite-Babylonian cosmogony. In this the creator-god could not produce an ordered creation until he had conquered the equally divine forces of disorder, Rahab/Tiamat, resident in and typified by the sea. Of any such pre-creation combat Genesis 1 is, of course, completely free. Nevertheless, the Old Testament makes potent use of the pagan mythology of creation: to underline the absolute sway of the Lord (the sea and Rahab are absolutely at his mercy; Jb. 26:11–12, Ps. 89:8ff. <9ff.>); to affirm that there is no power anywhere except that of the Lord (even

Tiamat is wholly at the Lord's bidding; [Am. 9:3](#)); and to focus the historical concreteness and reality of the Lord's power (belief that Marduk overthrew Tiamat is credulity for there was no witness to bring back a sure word). We see the difference in the 'you' and 'us' of [Joshua 4:23](#) and in 'your eyes have seen' ([Dt. 4:3](#)), for the Old Testament insists on setting the rock of history (actual event, actual testimony) under its theology. Neither Isaiah nor the Old Testament, of course, give credence to the existence of Rahab/Tiamat by this use of mythology, yet at the same time they signal that in this world the people of God are always challenged in their loyalty by other claimants to devotion. But there is only one God who has demonstrated his reality, and only one way of faith, for faith is not a leap in the dark but a considered response to convincing evidence. Thus, verses [9–11](#) contain the true confidence of intercession: what the Lord revealed of himself in the past he still is. He heard their cry at the Red Sea and responded dramatically and completely; he alone is God, and there is no way in which his will can be resisted; he has power over all the power of the enemy, of whatever category or claim. In a word, the prayer of verses [9–11](#) is the prayer of faith.

A¹ A new act, recapitulating the past: a work of power ([9](#))

A²The past act described ([10](#))

A³The new act affirmed: a work of ransom, homecoming and joy ([11](#))

[9](#) *Awake, awake!* is an example of reduplication for emotional intensity. In the rich anthropomorphism of the Bible, [Exodus 2:24](#) suggests sudden divine recollection after a prolonged lapse of memory! So here, to the human eye it seems as if the Lord has gone to sleep over his promises. In other words, the anthropomorphism calls on God to act with the same dispatch and urgency that would follow if, in our experience, we woke to the sudden recollection of a forgotten duty. In the Bible the motif of 'clothing' stands for character, ability and commitment, as when the Lord revealed himself to Joshua as an armed man ([Jos. 5:13](#)). In other words, it is God's character to take issue with his foes; he has the ability to do so, and he commits himself to the task. The appeal here presupposes the power resident in the divine nature and calls for commitment to effect a work of power. *Arm of the LORD* is a vivid metaphor (*cf.* [Ex. 15:16](#); [1 Ki. 8:42](#)) and is never used simply of strength. It is 'not something apart from God himself but is God himself in his might'.³³ When creation is attributed to the Lord's arm ([Ps. 89:11ff.](#); [Je. 27:5](#); [32:17](#)), the outgoing of creative power is represented as the outgoing of God himself to create. Not

even the greatest men of the Old Testament, most central to God's mighty works, are spoken of as his 'arm'. Rather, the Lord's arm went with Moses ([63:12](#)) and strengthened David ([Ps. 89:20–21](#)).³⁴ Expectation is thus focused on the Lord himself, with the metaphor underlining that he is looked for in person and in power. If we are to understand fully the climactic reference in [53:1](#) we must be clear about this.

The Lord's past acts were truly historical, taking place at certain dates (*days*) and in the experience of certain people (*generations*)—very different from the Rahab mythology!³⁵ What in Canaan-Babylon was prehistory, a mere rumour of divine prowess, in Israel is identified with historical events: the overthrow of Egypt at the exodus (*cf.* verse [10](#), the Red Sea). It is not just 'anything they can do I can do better', rather it is a matter of the verified acts of the Lord offering a sure ground for faith. Without history theology is surmise.

10 The Hebrew word for *the sea* is *yām*, and in Ugaritic literature (our source document for Canaanite religion) Yam is the name of a mythological foe killed by Baal. Once more Isaiah offers history in the place of mythology, for the Lord's conquest of *yām* took place before witnesses at the Red Sea. We must notice too, however, that it is not the victor gods (Marduk, Baal) but specifically the forces of destruction which Isaiah brings before us (*Rahab*, 'dragon', *sea*, *great deep*—this last being the ocean habitat of Rahab/Tiamat). All that disrupts, threatens or destroys is under the Lord's sovereign sway, even sovereignly turned into blessings, as when the *great deep* became an escape route for the redeemed. To our ears, Canaanite-Babylonian mythology seems crude, but

³⁴ The 'arm' of the Lord is an exodus motif ([Ex. 6:6](#); [Dt. 4:34; 5:15; 7:19](#)). Of the twenty-eight references in the Old Testament, eleven are in Isaiah ([30:30](#); [40:10](#); [48:14](#); [51:5, 9](#); [52:10](#); [53:1](#); [59:16](#); [62:8](#); [63:5, 12](#)).

³⁵ Whybray notes that in Ugaritic literature (our source-text for Canaanite religion) the 'dragon' (*tannîn*) is the adversary killed by Baal, but that Rahab 'is, as far as it is possible to tell, peculiar to the Israelite version'. Why is this, and why is Rahab used as a derisory name for Egypt? Did Egypt's pretentiousness (Rahab means 'arrogant boasting') come first and then, through meditation on the Lord's historical mastery of the waters of the Red Sea, a link was made with mythology? Or did the ludicrousness of any thought of opposition to the Creator make the mythological Rahab a figure of fun, which then made an easy transition to the posturings of Egypt?

the Bible insists on the reality of forces of evil and hurt, and in this connection Isaiah is the voice of biblical perspective and comfort. He was right to see a welling up of the armies of the abyss when our ancestors of old were threatened with Egyptian genocide, and to see their deliverance as a signal demonstration of divine power. We have the sure word of the Lord Jesus that the cross was both the final throw in Satan's power-bid for world dominion, and also the achievement of such a work of redemption as made Satan of no further significance. Yet intermediate skirmishes in the same warfare are the daily lot of God's people. Every circumstance offers an exit for forces from the abyss to disrupt and destroy, and every circumstance is in the hands of the great victor to transform it into a way of escape for pilgrims to Zion ([1 Cor. 10:13](#)). The *redeemed* ($\sqrt{gā'}$ *al*; [35:9–10](#)) are those who have experienced the work of their divine Next-of-kin taking all their needs as his own.

[11](#) Virtually identical with [35:10](#), which reads (lit) 'joy and gladness they will attain and sorrow and sighing will flee away', this verse reads 'joy and gladness they will attain; sorrow and sighing will have fled away'. Thus the impassioned prayer of verse [9](#) modulates, under the influence of historical certainties ([10](#)), into the key of confident faith. For the wording of verse [11](#) see [35:10](#) (cf. [Heb. 11:22](#); [Rev. 21:2](#)).³⁶

Words of comfort ([51:12–16](#))

As the outline above shows, verses [9–16](#) are an interlude between the promises of [51:1–8](#) and the commands of [51:17–52:12](#). The promises excite prayer ([9–11](#)), and the prayer is met by words of divine assurance. *Awake, awake* ([9](#)) finds a response in *I, even I* ([12](#)), as if to say 'But I am as alert as ever you might require!' Apt, however, as the section is in context, its wording causes perplexity. Verse [12a](#) is addressed to *you* (plural masculine); [12bc](#) questions *you* (singular feminine); and from verse [13](#) onwards the address is to *you* (singular masculine). Verses [13–14](#) concern a fearful, threatened, cowering one, who

³⁶ It would be easy to make the wording of [35:10](#) and [51:11](#) coincide (see *BHS*), but such suspicion about the text is as groundless as Duhm's contention that [51:11](#) is insertional and inappropriate. [51:9–10](#) needs to flow into some suitable additional thought else the prayer becomes unacceptably abrupt, and that it should merge into a strong affirmation of faith is contextually right. Thus the exercise of prayer ([51:9](#)) arises out of faith (in the promises just made, [51:1–8](#)) and begets strong faith that it will be so ([51:11](#)).

will be released and fed; verses 15–16 concerns a prophetic figure with a universal ministry. North speaks for many when he says that this passage is the Achilles' heel of any theory that no subsequent additions were made to the original work of the prophet.³⁷ This will hardly do, however, for it is impermissible to solve problems by assuming lunatic sub-editors who worked without thought for sequence or syntax. It would, of course, be the work of a minute to alter verse 12bc from feminine to masculine and so satisfy our tidy minds, but before we resort to this further reflection is in order.

Since in the text as we have it different persons appear in verses 12bc, 13–15 and 16, the plural *you* of verse 12a is understandable: divine comfort is addressed to all alike. The terms of verse 16 point to an address to the Servant, endowed with the Lord's word (16a; 42:4; 49:2; 50:4), sheltered by his hand (16b; 49:2) and with a universal and Zion-centred task (16c–e; 42:1; 49:5–6). As to the doomed prisoner of verses 13–16, we noted that though Isaiah is concerned from 49:1 onwards with the spiritual recovery of the people, the motifs he uses are drawn from the Babylon/captivity/exile pool. Thus, verse 14 has parallels in 49:9, 17, 19, 24. The accusation of forgetfulness (13a) subtly redirects the complaint of 49:14 that the Lord has forgotten them. The contextual feminine which would correspond with verse 12bc is Zion itself (*cf.* 49:14; 51:17; 52:1), and if we follow this lead we note that the same order of address—Zion, the captives, the Servant—has already occurred in 49:14–21; 49:22–50:3; 50:4–9 and will be repeated in 51:17–52:2; 52:3–12; 52:13–53:12. Seen in this way, verses 12–16 is a mosaic of fragments dealing in turn with Zion, the captives and the Servant as the three dramatis personae who need comfort and reassurance as the movement of the chapters speeds towards its climax.

12a On *I*, even *I* see the introductory note above. By the reduplication the Lord matches the emotional intensity of his people (9a). He is as concerned to answer as they to call. Also, he is himself the answer they need, for *comforts* is a participle, expressing both action and attribute, and an unvarying relationship. Genesis 24:67 illustrates the meaning.³⁸

12bc Zion is offered comfort not through some special dispensation or act of God but

³⁷ North, *Second Isaiah*, p. 214.

³⁸ For $\sqrt{nāhām}$ in Isaiah, see 1:24; 57:6 (Niphal); 12:1; 22:4; 40:1; 49:13; 51:3, 12, 19; 52:9; 61:2; 66:13 (Piel); 54:11; 66:13 (Pual).

by being invited to consider who she is and what her foes are: being who you are, how is it that you fear them, being what they are? Attention is focused on the quality of Zion's foes: *men* ('*enôš*) expresses human frailty (*cf.* verse 7); *mortal*/‘who dies’ is an attributive use of the imperfect verb (‘who keeps dying’), and shows the perishableness of human beings, as a continuing characteristic, not just at the end but throughout what they call life; *sons of men* are those who are in essence human and have only human resources to draw on and who are finally (lit) ‘appointed to be’ *grass*, *i.e.* consigned by the Creator to fragility and transience (*cf.* 40:7). There is no corresponding analysis of Zion, but the implication is that her qualities are the opposite of human frailty, mortality, limitation and transience. *Fear* is in the perfect tense, meaning ‘gripped by fear’.

13–15 The prophet now turns to another addressee with (lit.) ‘And you have forgotten ...!’. If Zion was called to look inwards and live according to her dignity, the new addressee, the captive of verse 14, is called to look up and refresh his memory about his God.

A¹The Lord your Maker, Creator of all (13a–c)

B¹ Human power: terror and threat (13d–g)

B² The power of circumstances: oppression and deprivation (14)

A²The Lord your God, Sovereign over earthly forces (15)

The shape of the oracle is its message: whatever is the case with the people of God—opposed by human forces, oppressed by circumstances—they are surrounded by the reality of their God in all his creatorial almightyess.

13 *Your Maker* is the one who made you what you are by election, grace, exodus-redemption and providential care (44:2). As always, *your* implies ‘the one who had made himself yours’ not ‘the one you have claimed as your own’. The primary commitment is the Lord’s, and he is no (mere) national God but the Creator of all, *heavens* and *earth*, with the fourfold power which that involves (37:16). To *forget* him (to live without an immediate sense of who he is, what he has done, his close presence, care and sovereign power) is to live in defeat (Ps. 78:9–11) and disobedience (Ps. 78:40–42). The imagery behind the *terror*, *wrath*, oppression and *destruction* is that of earthly enemies, but the reality is the defeated and distraught condition of people needing redemption from sin and restoration to God. *Bent on* the form of the verb (*kônēn*), is not properly reflexive but transitive and is probably an ellipsis (‘sets [an arrow in his bow]’; Pss. 7:12 〈13〉 ;

11:2; 21:12 <13>), here ‘who takes aim in order to destroy’. *For where* is better a slightly indignant ‘And where ...?’. The threat of the foe is real enough but what is it and where is it in comparison with the power of the Creator?

14 *Prisoners* is an interpretative addition to the participle ‘the cowering one’. Hemmed in by the foe they may be and cowering before his threats, but he will not have his way; freedom and not the dungeon, food and not hunger will be the lot of the Lord’s people. Commentators fly in the face of the evidence when they make this verse refer to the Babylonian exile, where we know that life was far from oppressive (Je. 29:4–7) and in fact became so homelike that in the event few could uproot themselves to return to Zion. It is inconceivable that a prophet resident in Babylon could have written this verse as a description of the exiles. Rather, it is a development of the motif of a captive as such, part of Isaiah’s literary artistry. Just as he wrote 10:28–32 as though he were reporting enemy advance and 46:1–2 as though he were watching an evacuation, so here it is as though he were among people cowering before an overwhelming foe. For this is in truth the plight of the people of God unless he save them: burdened, doomed to die, wasting. *Die in their dungeon* is ‘die into the pit’, i.e. ‘die as one doomed to the pit’. This could be part of the metaphor of the condemned criminal: to die and be flung into a common grave. It can, however, have overtones of death without divine favour (38:17; Ps. 49:9 <10>), the opposite of finding a ransom for the soul (Ps. 49:7–8 <8–9> ; cf. verse 14f. <15f.>).

15 *For I am*/‘As for me, I am ...’ is an emphatic and abrupt recall of the mind to the Lord. The thought behind *churns up*³⁹ is not that no matter how the sea may rage the Lord is mightier and in control (Ps. 93), but that the raging itself is a manifestation of his will and power; even at this level of world management, the Creator is sovereign (10:5–15; Ps. 107:23–32). *On Almighty*/‘of hosts’ see 1:9.

16 This verse describes the equipment, security and task of the Servant. In this review of the *dramatis personae* involved in the great redemption, the Servant comes before

³⁹ The words *who churns ... his name* occur exactly in Je. 31:35. Rather than that either borrowed from the other, it is reasonable to think that each is quoting a well-known hymn (other parts of which are found in Am. 4:13; 5:8; 9:5f.), or that all these passages come from the same collection of hymns. There is sufficient identity of poetical form for us to think of a hymn/hymns to God the Creator.

the Lord for his word of assurance. The verse consists of two divine affirmations (*put* and *covered*) and three infinitives of purpose ('to plant', 'to lay', 'to say'). Logically, *covered* might be thought to precede *put my words*, i.e. (as in 49:2) the Servant is kept concealed until the fulness of the time comes. There are two reasons for the unexpected order. First, so that the primacy might be given to the Servant's prophetic status. He is first of all a minister of the Lord's word. The mystery of prophetic inspiration—that a human *mouth* should speak as its own what were in fact God's words (Je. 1:9; Ezk. 2:7–3:4; Am. 1:1, 3)—is true also of the climactic prophetic figure of the Servant (cf. 42:1–4; 49:2; 50:4). The second reason is so that he may know that the covering hand which hid him until the time came for him to be revealed has not been withdrawn but covers him also in the execution of his task. *I who set* is an odd rendering of 'to plant'.⁴⁰ The alternatives are 'in order that I may plant'—the purpose the Lord will achieve through his Servant; or 'in order that you may plant'—the work the Servant will do. 'To plant' is well established as a metaphor for 'to begin *de novo*' or 'to set firmly in place'.⁴¹ If planting stresses new beginning, then 'laying the foundations' points to solidity and durability of achievement. The Servant is the point of origin of a new cosmic reality embracing heaven and earth. Jeremiah (1:9f.) was gifted with the Lord's word to 'plant kingdoms', but the Servant will plant heavens, doing the creatorial work which the Bible reserves for God himself. Something greater than a prophet is here! *Who say/and to say to Zion, 'You are my people'* shows the centrality of the Lord's people in the Lord's and the Servant's cosmic purposes. *My people* is the ultimate fulfilment of the covenant promise (Ex. 6:7; cf. 49:8).

c. Commands to respond: the experience of salvation (51:17–52:12)

The outline on p. 402 shows how this section links back to what has gone before. The parallel between the promises of 51:1–8 and the commands beginning at 51:17 suggests that the promises have been fulfilled and nothing remains but to enter into them. Thus, 51:1–3 promises Eden restored, and 51:17–23 declares that the curse is removed. The

⁴⁰ BHS would alter *lintôa'* ('to plant') to *lintôt* ('to stretch out'), replacing the striking with the commonplace.

⁴¹ The verbal 'to plant' is a well established metaphor—of founding kingdoms anew (Je. 24:6; Am. 9:15); etc.

way is therefore open to awake to what the Lord has done (51:17). But this view of 51:17–52:12 raises a problem: how has the wrath of God (51:17–23) been removed? Similarly, 52:1 calls Zion to enter into holiness because redemption has been accomplished (52:9): how has it been accomplished? A new exodus is called for (52:11–12), but how is this possible? No light is cast on these questions until the Lord finally summons his people to ‘behold my Servant’ (52:13). In this way the promises of 51:1–8 become the commands of 51:17–52:12, and all alike rest on the atoning work of the Servant in 52:13–53:12.

The three sections beginning at 51:17 are marked off by the double imperatives (51:17; 52:1, 11) with which they start. Thematically, they move from the ending of divine wrath (51:17–23) to the status of holiness on the basis of salvation (52:1–2, 3–10) and the life of pilgrimage in purity, carrying the Lord’s vessels (52:11–12). This is the consummation of the exodus theology: the Passover theme of wrath averted and falling on Israel’s foes (Ex. 12); the Sinai theme of the holy people (Ex. 19:4–6) delivered from bondage into obedience (Ex. 20:2ff.); and the Passover theme of pilgrimage (Ex. 12:11) coupled with the Sinai-tabernacle theme (Ex. 25ff.; Nu. 9:15ff.), in which the pilgrims carried the holy things.

The cup of fury (51:17–23)

As Isaiah approaches his people with commands to enter a salvation that is ready and waiting for them, he begins with the wrath of God, alerting them to a divine work which has made this wrath a thing of the past (*cf.* 12:1; Rom. 1:16–18).

A¹ The cup of wrath given and drunk (17)

B Bereft Zion (18–20)

B¹ No sons to help (18)

B² No comforter (19)

B³ No sons remaining (20)

A² The cup of wrath removed (21–23)

The A sections are linked by the *cup of wrath* theme and by the hand which gave the cup (17c) and the hand from which it was removed (22c). The B sections are three four-line stanzas with the reference to *sons* in the first and third forming an inclusio. The absence of human help and comfort in the first two stanzas prepares for the climax in

the third, where all this distress is explained by the wrath of the Lord. In this way *wrath* (17d, 20d, 22e) is the linking theme. In the matching 51:1–3 the promise was Eden restored; this is now accomplished by the removal of the curse of God upon sin and sinners.

17 This verse begins with an urgent summons to ‘Rouse yourself’ (as in verse 9 and 52:1, but here in reflexive form). They had called on the Lord (9) as though he was asleep, but actually it was they who had slept while momentous things were happening. The explanation follows the *Therefore* in verse 21. All life’s experiences are blended into a cup for us by the Lord but specially the due apportionment of his *wrath* (Pss. 11:6; 75:8 <9>; Je. 25:15ff.; Ezk. 23:31ff.). The *cup* represents his personal decision and appointment (Mt. 26:39; Jn. 18:11). *The goblet that makes men stagger/‘the goblet of the cup of trembling’* is a doubled expression to emphasize the idea.⁴² *Stagger/‘tremble’* is not the staggering walk of the intoxicated but the final stages of tremens: a picture of being hopelessly, irretrievably under the wrath of God.

18 Duplications hammer the message home: *sons ... sons; bore ... guide; brought up ... take*. Humanly speaking (Ps. 127:5), Jerusalem should have been well-armoured against calamity—a situation to which she had attended diligently in bearing and rearing sons. She might have expected to be supported by wisdom to *guide* and proffered strength to *take by the hand*, but no human resource avails against divine wrath (cf. 50:2; 59:16; 63:3; 65:12).

19 Duplication is the idiom of totality. Thus, even though every human resource of effort, personnel and assistance (18) was there, *ruin and destruction* (total disaster touching property) and *famine and sword* (total destruction against people) left not even a voice to *console*. The destroyed city pictures the devastating effect of divine wrath in action. It runs beyond human power to resist (18) and human tenderness to assuage (19). The Hebrew (see the NIV mg.) is lit. ‘Who I can comfort you?’ This suggests either ‘How can (even) I comfort you?’, i.e. not even a prophet can offer a comforting word, or ‘Who (but) I can comfort you?’, i.e. the Lord, the commander and promiser of comfort (40:1; 51:3, 12) calls attention to himself as the only one who can deal with his own

⁴² *Goblet* (*qubba'at*) is found only here and in verse 22. This prompts some to suggest that *cup* has been added to explain it. But this fails to account for the same words in verse 22, for it is hardly likely that the glossator would consider a second explanation would be needed so soon.

wrath. The former sense is perhaps the more usual for the idiom.

20 This third picture of loss returns to the theme of Jerusalem's sons and, in particular, to why they cannot bring the help verse 18 suggested. The two duplications, *fainted* and *lie*, *wrath* and *rebuke*, bracket a grim illustration: the hopelessly enmeshed animal, full of terror and without ability or opportunity of escape. Zion's sons are doubly helpless (20ab), wrath is doubly their portion (20de). And as for Zion, if her sons have fallen, there is no hope for the future.

21 The next three verses describe the end and removal of wrath. *Therefore* introduces the Lord's conclusions arising from the situation of human helplessness (18), comfortlessness (19) and hopelessness (20) under his wrath. *Afflicted* is 'humbled', i.e. down-trodden, in context by divine wrath. *Drunk, but not with wine* (cf. 29:9 for this Isaianic motif) returns to the metaphor of the cup, the deliberate measuring out of wrath.

22 The double description of the city (21) gave no hint to what the *therefore* was leading. The suspense is increased by a fourfold description of the divine speaker as: (i) *Sovereign* ('*a_dōnāy*). Exceptionally, Isaiah uses here the plural, usually reserved for human 'lords', possibly in order to stress that this lordship is not just that of the transcendent God but a practical lordship for every day, as of husband to wife (1 Ki. 1:17) and parent to child (Gn. 31:35). (ii) The *LORD* (*yahweh*). Revealed, by his own choice, as the God who saves his people and judges his enemies. (iii) *Your God*. The God who has committed himself to you and your welfare. (iv) The God of absolute justice and legality who *defends* (✓ *rīb*, 'plead the cause of') *his people* and takes the case to the bar of justice. Whatever he does is legally approved; it is not arbitrary or a kindly indulgence or concession, nor on the other hand an extravagant sentence, but only what justice itself directs.

See, I have taken belongs within the vividness of the illustration. The poor trembling drunk is *awake* (17) now to *see* that the cup of wrath has gone from the *hand* that held it. Somehow, while the drunken stupor lasted, the Lord acted for the helpless one. The Lord gave (17), the Lord has taken away; blessed indeed be the name of the Lord! Movingly, Isaiah repeats the wording of verse 17df. The wrath so well deserved, the wrath so exactly apportioned, is that wrath which is gone. *From that cup* is an interpretative addition and should be omitted: *the goblet* (as verse 17, 'the goblet of the cup') is in apposition to 'the cup of trembling' in verse 22d. It is important to preserve this identity

between what was given (17) and what was removed—and removed once and for all, for (lit.) ‘you will not drink it ever again’. The wrath of a sin-hating God can have nothing to do with them. This, then, is the significance of *therefore* (21a): a logic operates within the nature of God whereby the due reward of their deeds is, with perfect justice, averted and wrath satisfied.

23 The justice of God operates in another direction also, to afflict those who afflicted his people. At the exodus, the Lord’s Passover redemption of his people coincided with his just visitation upon Egypt for refusing his word and afflicting his people. It was not the visitation of just punishment on Egypt that redeemed the people (else why was the Passover sacrifice required?), but the removal of wrath from the one and the infliction of wrath on the other were two sides of the same divine action. On the Lord’s historical punishments of his people’s foes see 10:5–15. He will execute our vengeance on every power that claimed and exercised domination over us. But the question has yet to be answered what Passover work of God waits to be revealed as the explanation of verse 22.

Holy Zion, Sovereign God, universal salvation (52:1–10)

Another *Awake, awake* (1, as 51:9) heralds a new section (*cf.* 51:17). It falls into three parts. In verses 1–2 Jerusalem is roused to enjoy a new condition. Along with the removal of divine wrath (51:17–23) there has come a true holiness (1b–d), with its concomitants of separation (1ef) and royal dignity (2). This invariably provokes the question ‘How?’, and the initial *For* of verse 3 promises explanation. Verses 3–6 allow us into the mind of the Lord while he promises a free redemption (3) because the bondage of his people is something he cannot tolerate (4–5). *Therefore* (6), the day of the Lord’s self-revelation is coming. Verses 7–10 take us beyond the Lord’s victorious act to his triumphant homecoming to Zion. The lone runner shouts ‘Your God is king’ (7), the cry is taken up by the watchers on the walls (8) and the city resounds with joy (9). Whatever it is he has done, the Lord has *bared his holy arm in the sight of all the nations* (10)—but as to the act itself, we are still in suspense! The matching section (51:4–6) promised worldwide revelation and universal salvation; this section tells us it has happened. We still wait to learn what it is. The artistry of Isaiah is as much seen in his suspenseful withholding of information as in his use of words and images.

The new Zion: ideals fulfilled (52:1–2)

Notwithstanding the priestly house of Aaron and the royal house of David, the ideal of a

royal, priestly people ([Ex. 19:4–6](#)) had never been realized, but while Zion slept ([1a](#)) a marvel occurred so that on waking she finds new garments laid out ([1bc](#)), expressive of a new status of holiness ([1d](#)). And this is no delusion, for as she rises, fetters fall and a throne awaits ([2](#)).

1 The excitement of the double call and the figure of waking from sleep are both part of the intention. Zion thought the Lord needed rousing ([51:9](#)), as if he were no more than Baal (*cf.* [1 Ki. 18:27](#))! So hard is it to maintain faith in a dark day that it is simpler to question the character of God than to walk in patience and trust. But while sleep immobilized, someone was acting on Zion's behalf, and she is called into blessings on a non-contributory basis. *Clothe yourself* and *Put on* are the same verb twice, 'Put on ... put on'. The metaphor of clothing ([51:9](#)) means 'be what you really are'; it is not an exercise in pretence or a 'cover-up' but a manifestation of character. So here it means enjoy and display the strength now truly yours. The expression *your garments of splendour*/‘beauty’ is found only here but the background is [Exodus 28:2](#), where the high priestly garments are for ‘glory and beauty’. The Lord’s people are at last the priestly people of divine intention ([Ex. 19:6](#)). The Lord’s first object was to satisfy the requirements of his holiness ([51:17–23](#)); his second object, here, is to share his holiness with his people. *The uncircumcised ... will not enter you again* expresses the finality of what has been accomplished and, for Zion, the full reality of being the separated, distinct, undefiled people of the Lord. Possession of the sign of circumcision legitimated membership of the covenant people. When Isaiah speaks of a community free from *the uncircumcised and defiled* he points to a situation where there is no doubt respecting membership or unacceptability in respect of character. When Aaron donned the robes of beauty there was an unreality about it all, in that the claim ‘Holy/holiness to the LORD’ ([Ex. 28:36](#)) was not reflected in the character of the wearer. Once their claim to citizenship in the holy city ([48:2](#)) was bogus; it will be so no longer.

2 Under the figures of captivity, Isaiah (as since [49:1](#)) is addressing a moral and spiritual bondage and a people needing not to return from exile, but to return to the Lord ([49:5–6](#)). Both the *dust* of humiliation and the *chains* of slavery need bind no longer. What the Lord had done for the archetypal king David (see the sequence [1 Sa. 30:1](#); [2 Sa. 1:1](#); [2:1–4](#)) and which was sung as an attribute of the God of Israel ([Ps. 113:7–8](#)), he now performs for his people that they may be the royal people of his desire, kings ([2](#)) and

priests (1). The contrast with Babylon (47:1) was well in Isaiah's mind (see on 44:24). *Captive* is emphatic, an appositional adjective: 'You captive one'.⁴³ *Free yourself* is the metaphor of clothing in reverse, a putting off of the old matching the putting on of the new (cf. Col. 3:9–10).

Divine soliloquy: coming divine self-revelation (52:3–6)

We note a tension at once between the 'already now' of verses 1–2, which call Zion to enter into the good of an existing reality, and the 'not yet' of verses 3–6. In other words, verses 3–6 'explain' (note *For* in verse 3) verses 1–2 by looking forward to a coming act of God.⁴⁴ The purpose of verses 3–6 is, therefore, to take us behind the scenes in relation to verses 1–2 to learn of the act of God which makes that dramatic shedding of the old and donning of the new possible. The section, in Isaiah's vigorous free verse style, consists of three pairs of statements. In the first pair (3–4), each is introduced by *this is what the LORD says*; in the second (5), each includes *declares the LORD*; in the third (6), each begins with *therefore*. Each pair concerns *my people* (4b, 5b, 6a); the first and second pairs share *for nothing* (3b, 5b); the second and third share *my name* (5e, 6a); and there is an overall movement from past to future:

- A The first pair. The past: certainty of redemption (3–4)
 - a¹ Free redemption pledged (3)
 - a² Historical assurances (4)
- B The second pair. The present: the Lord's dishonoured name (5)
 - b¹ His people scorned (5ab)
 - b² His name dishonoured (5c–f)
- C The third pair. The future: coming divine self-revelation (6)
 - c¹ The name revealed (6a)
 - c² The voice and presence of the Lord (6b–d)

⁴³ 'Sit enthroned ... captive' (*šebîyyâ*) is a beautiful pun, identical sounds with opposite meanings! This is lost in e.g. the RSV's insistence in altering the first word to 'captive'.

⁴⁴ Commentators differ about verses 3–6. Some find evidence of a later writer, others see Isaiah at his vigorous best. No doubt these verses are not what we would have expected as an explanation of verses 1–2. We would have expected a description of a past act, not a promise of a coming one. But it is Isaiah's plan to heighten tension and increase suspense.

3–4 The initial *For* (3) sets out to answer an implied question: How can Zion, on awaking, find that a new status of strength, holiness and royalty has been made ready for her? The second *For* (4) supports the promise of free redemption by alluding to past situations.

3 *Sold* is a metaphor of passing into other ownership (*cf.* Jdg. 2:14; 3:8; 4:2), but the Judges situation indicates that the ‘sale’ was not an irrevocable transaction. The ‘property’ remained the Lord’s, and he could recover it at will. *For nothing* (*hinnām*) means ‘without provocative cause’ (1 Sa. 19:5), ‘without purposeful cause’ (Pr. 1:17), or ‘at no cost/payment’ (Gn. 29:15). The last is appropriate to the present passage and the verb ‘to sell’. The ‘sale’ was not carried through to the point where money changed hands and the deal was finalized; it is open to the Lord to recover his property. This he will do: *without money you will be redeemed*. The Old Testament makes redemption ($\sqrt{gā'}$ *al*; *cf.* 35:10) an essentially ‘price-paying’ conception, therefore, to place together *without money* and *you will be redeemed* provokes the question, ‘With what, then?’ For in context, *without money* cannot mean ‘without cost to yourselves’, as this would destroy the parallelism with *sold for nothing*. The thing sold is not the gainer in any transaction. The meaning is: just as the seller in this case made no gain, so the redeemer will not pay money. But what will he pay?—for pay he must! Once more we are left in suspense.

4 The divine title is amplified for further assurance: the *LORD* (*yahweh*) is by nature the exodus Redeemer (Ex. 6:6–7); as *Sovereign* ($'a\bar{d}ōnāy$) he is irresistably so. The references to *Egypt* and *Assyria* add further assurance by recalling examples of times when he intervened as Next-of-kin for his helpless ones. *To live* ($\sqrt{gūr}$) means to take up temporary residence as a protected alien. Israel entered Egypt at a time of distress by Pharaoh’s invitation (Gn. 45:16ff.), and there was no call for events to take the turn they did. When, however, the laws of hospitality were violated and Israel was helpless before a threat of genocide, the divine Next-of-kin came (Ex. 3:7–8) to redeem (Ex. 6:6). *Lately*⁴⁵ *Assyria* has been the oppressor. Isaiah reviews oppression from the ‘A’ of Egypt to the ‘Z’ of Assyria—the whole history of oppression as he had known it.⁴⁶ Within the

⁴⁵ The translation of *b^eepes* as ‘for nothing’, ‘for no good cause’ (*cf.* the RSV) is without biblical support. The NIV correctly has *lately*, more literally, ‘at the end’.

⁴⁶ The contrast between Egypt and Assyria as the oppressors demands such a person as Isaiah of Jerusalem. How could an exilic prophet ignore Babylon?

living memory of his hearers the Lord had stood by his helpless and unworthy people, offering solid foundation for trusting him for the future ([37:36ff.](#)).

5 Declares (*n^eum*; see [1:24](#)) marks out the paired utterances in this verse (see the outline above). Two things move the Lord as he soliloquizes: the misery of his people and the honour of his name. *And now*/‘Now then’ makes a logical connection. The idiom *What do I have here?* (see [22:1, 16](#))⁴⁷ is used here either ironically/playfully (‘What am I playing at?’/‘What can I have been thinking about?’) or seriously (‘Does this matter to me?’). The answer is foregone: the Lord’s people and the Lord’s name constitute his primary motivations (cf. on ‘people’ [Ex. 32:11–14](#); on ‘name’ [Jos. 7:7–9](#)). *For nothing* is as verse [3](#). *Those who rule them mock* is ‘their rulers wail’ in the [MT](#). Isaiah had lived through such a day when he saw the helplessness of Hezekiah before the Assyrians ([37:1–4](#)), and he must have envisaged an even greater wailing as the city fell to the Babylonians. If the rulers are helpless, how grim is the state of the people ([2 Ki. 6:26–27](#))! But in the present passage the helpless tears before the foe picture the spiritual plight of the people, helpless in sin.⁴⁸ *All day long* and *constantly* are the identical words in [51:13](#), where they referred to the plight of the Lord’s people. Here they refer to the dishonour to his name. What hurts them hurts him.

6 The double *therefore* (‘strongly emphatic and its repetition ... deliberate’ according to Torrey) indicates a high degree of excitement on Isaiah’s part.⁴⁹ The first *therefore* clause says that the people will come to an enhanced conviction about the Lord’s *name*. Something is going to happen which will confirm and reinforce all that the name means. This will be not a revelation of new truth, for the name is unchangeable ([Ex. 3:15](#)), but a new revelation of existing truth, the redeeming God of the exodus mani-

⁴⁷ The idiom *mah-lî-pôh* (‘What to me here?’) has many shades of meaning: ‘What brings you here?’ ([1 Ki. 19:9](#)); ‘What’s the matter with you?’ ([Gn. 21:17](#)); ‘What do you want?’ ([Est. 5:3](#)); ‘What right have you?’ ([Is. 3:15](#)); ‘What do you think you’re playing at?’ ([Jon. 1:6](#)); ‘What concern is it of yours?’ ([Ho. 14:8<9>](#)); ‘What does it signify to you?’ ([Ex. 12:26](#)).

⁴⁸ Commonly *y^ehêlîlû* (‘wail’) is altered to *y^ehôl^{el}lû* (‘make fools of/mock’). The alteration is minimal and is supported by Q^a.

⁴⁹ The suggestion that the second *therefore* is an error in the text is supported by Q^a and advocated by [BHS](#). But to delete it destroys the ‘double statement’ structure of this poem. It is easier to see how it could be lost than to explain how it could have entered the text.

fested in the coming redemption (3). The second *therefore* clause asserts that in this coming event the Lord will be present in word and person. The English versions are right to repeat *they will know* (6b) from the previous line, but Isaiah's Hebrew rushes headlong to make its point: 'therefore in that day,⁵⁰ that I am he who speaks—behold me!'. In the exodus redemption and revelation of his name, the Lord set up a mediator to speak for him (Ex. 6:28–7:3; 19:9), but in the coming day he will speak in person and in such a way as to be able to say, 'Behold me!'.

The Lord's homecoming (52:7–10)

In this third section of the oracle we are not told how the 'Behold me!' of verse 6 will be fulfilled. We are moved forward beyond the redemptive act to the coming of the victorious Lord to Zion when he is indeed seen with open vision. But what he has done to win the victory—the redemption 'without money' (3), his presence in word and person (6)—is not explained, only that the great act has been successful and the victor comes home in triumph. We still wait, tantalized by hints and promises, to learn what he has done and how he has done it.

- A The messenger and his fourfold message (7)
- B The watchmen and their unison song and unmistakable vision (8)
- C The city and its fourfold ground of rejoicing (9–10)

⁵⁰ It is widely presumed that the words *in that day* must betoken the work of a post-exilic editor (e.g. Mowinckel, *He that Cometh*, p. 147). But P. R. House must be heard when he notes that 'no textual or contextual evidence supports this claim' and (where the words are omitted on metrical grounds) that 'the poet's intention for his metre is unknown'. No manuscripts omit the words, and the context does not warrant change. (*Zephaniah: A Prophetic Drama*, JSOTS 69 [1988], pp. 127–128). What House urges for Zephaniah applies equally to Isaiah. In the Old Testament the formula occurs fourteen times in pre-exilic, and twenty-six times in post-exilic, authors. It is thus well established over both periods. Kaiser considers it a 'favourite stylistic device of the redactor for adding further sayings to the material already present' but there is no evidence for this. If the Isaianic literature is taken into account as pre-exilic, then pre-exilic use outweighs post-exilic by forty-seven to twenty-six. It is surely against all reason that so obvious a way of saying something (seeing that the 'day of the Lord' is a pre-exilic commonplace) should be a sign of post-exilic editing!

7 Within Isaiah's day, did a runner bring the news of Sennacherib's hasty and humbled evacuation of Libnah ([37:36–37](#))? Maybe, but the best-documented account of the runner with tidings is [2 Samuel 18:24ff.](#) The scene must have repeated itself often, with ill news and good, during Jerusalem's turbulent history. *How beautiful* they would reckon the sight of a lone runner—not a straggle of fugitives betokening defeat, but one messenger with a spring in his step! As he comes within earshot he shouts: *peace, good tidings, salvation, Your God reigns.* Isaiah began this series of oracles ([40:3ff.](#)) with three voices, of which the last proclaimed 'Here is your God!' ([40:9ff.](#)) The advent of the messenger here brings the series full circle. The victor God of [40:10–11](#) is coming home to Zion in full kingly dignity. According to the imagery, *peace* is the end of war and threat; *good tidings* means that there is no bad news to mar the situation; and *salvation* means that the power of the oppressor has been broken and those in bondage released. The result is that the kingship of the Lord is affirmed and established over all the power of the enemy. Contextually, however, we are moving in the theological and spiritual area of wrath removed from the Lord's people ([51:17](#)), their new status as kings and priests before him ([52:1–2](#)), the great redemption without money ([3](#)) and the revelation of the Lord in word and person ([6](#)). Whatever the act he has performed (and we still do not know what it is), this is what has been accomplished, and it is presented dramatically in the runner with his shout of victory. *Your God reigns* echoes the familiar cultic cry of Psalms [93:1; 97:1; 99:1](#). In those days they sang the words (as Christians sing Ascension Day hymns) in praise of a kingship acknowledged by faith. But Isaiah envisages a day when faith will pass into sight and the Victor himself will be seen face to face.

8 *Listen! Your watchmen* recalls [40:3](#) ('Listen, someone is calling ...'). The waiting people sense a buzz of excitement from the walls and marvellously the initial sound becomes a unison song merging into a *shout for joy*/‘shout aloud’. *With their own eyes/eye to eye* (*cf. Je. 32:4*) is not, as in our use of the idiom, ‘with agreement’ but ‘with total clarity’. There is no mistaking what they see, for hard on the heels of the runner comes *the LORD* himself. Thus, there is both fulfilment and non-fulfilment of the promise of verse [6](#). In the intended action the Lord will himself be present and his people will see him, and this has proved to be so. But what he has done and how has not yet been revealed.

9–10 The song spreads and all Jerusalem becomes the choir. The idiom of song (*cf.*

[26:1](#); [30:29](#); [42:10ff.](#); [49:13](#)), as ever, signifies entering joyfully into a benefit for which one has not worked, a response to blessings another has freely provided. The *ruins of Jerusalem* burst into song in ‘joy for all the former woes ten thousandfold repaid’! They are, according to Westermann, ‘the suffering, bewildered remnant’. Isaiah is not referring to the Babylonian captives but rather is using the motifs of destruction, bondage, oppression etc. to express the need for the spiritual redemption and return to the Lord which has been his theme since [48:22](#). It is in this sense that the city is a wasteland, and it is this situation that has been remedied by the victory from which the Lord is returning to Zion. The fourfold divine action (see the outline above) is divided into a double action for Zion ([9cd](#)) and a double action for the world ([10](#)). The Lord acts for *his people* in comfort ($\sqrt{nāham}$), fulfilling [40:1](#); [49:13](#); [51:3](#), [12](#), and in redemption ($\sqrt{gā'al}$) as promised in verse 3 (cf. [35:9–10](#); [51:11](#)). Next there is world-wide revelation of the Lord in person and power. The *arm* stands for the person in action and power to get things done. The Lord’s arm was first mentioned at [40:10](#) and reappears here as part of the rounding off process that is evident in the vocabulary of these verses. (Cf. [51:9](#), where the ‘arm’ is the exodus agent who would rise to fulfil the promises of [51:1–8](#).) The past tense, ‘has bared’, is to be preferred to *will lay bare*, as Isaiah is still looking back to the victorious act from which the Lord is returning. Only here is the Lord’s arm said to be ‘laid bare’. The picture is homely in the extreme: the Lord ‘rolls up his sleeves’ for his work. Since ‘to see’ is often used in the sense ‘to experience’, this may be intended here: the Lord’s personal act of power ([10a](#)) is both visible to all ([10b](#)) and intended for all as a *salvation* they may experience ([10c](#)). (Cf. the universal salvation promised in the parallel passage, [51:4–6](#).)

The greater exodus ([52:11–12](#))

Zechariah’s words, ‘to rescue us from the hand of our enemies, and to enable us to serve him without fear, in holiness’ ([Lk. 1:74–75](#)), might well have been a commentary on these verses, for they express exactly the point Isaiah has reached. At the exodus the Lord purposed a double blessing: liberation from bondage and restoration to himself. For this reason the tenth plague, which by itself effected liberation ([Ex. 12:29ff.](#)), was synchronous with the Passover so that at one and the same time, though by different means, Israel was delivered from Pharaoh’s bondage and from God’s wrath. But once the new day dawns there can be no tarrying in Egypt. When bondage goes, pilgrimage

starts. They went to Sinai that they might learn the will of their Redeemer and go forth bearing his holy vessels. Isaiah follows this pattern faithfully: the holy people ([1–2](#)), the Lord's redeemed ([3, 9](#)), must walk at liberty and in holiness. The two verses in this section are related as a call ([11](#)) and an explanation ([12](#), beginning with 'for' not *But*).

11 A call to negative (*go out, Touch no unclean thing*) and positive (*Come out/“go out’, be pure*) holiness. Most commentators (due to what Simon calls the ‘Cyrus-obsession’) find in *Go out from there* a reference to leaving Babylon with the temple vessels ([Ezr. 1:7–11](#)), but this cannot be correct. First, Isaiah concluded his treatment of Cyrus and Babylon at [48:20–21](#). Since then neither has been mentioned by name. The new need ([48:22](#)) and the predicted remedy ([49:5–6](#)) have been the sole theme. Devastation, bondage, captivity have been used as motifs, and the key to this was provided in [49:14–50:3](#), where Zion’s desolation and despondency were evidences of the spiritual malady of unresponsiveness to the Lord. The leading promises of God have been concerned with spiritual verities of salvation, righteousness, the end of divine wrath, holiness and priestliness. It is unthinkable to return at [52:11](#) to the historical events of captivity and liberation. To do so makes nonsense of the ordered way Isaiah presents his message. Secondly, there is a clear contrast between Isaiah’s vision of leaving Babylon ([48:20–21](#)) and the vision here. There the parallel with the exodus was precise: they are to ‘flee’, the word used in [Exodus 14:5](#) of Israel’s exit from Egypt. They had at last been given permission to leave by a notoriously capricious captor, and they lost no time in seizing the opportunity to get out before the royal mind changed again—which it did; they had left none too soon. But here they explicitly do not leave as fugitives. The urgency to start pilgrimage is moral and spiritual, arising from the command of God, not political and expedient, nervous of the fickleness of rulers. Simon interestingly proposes that the procession is formed by Jerusalem’s citizens, going out in holy array to escort their divine King back into the city (*cf.* [1 Sa. 18:6–7](#); [Jn. 12:12ff.](#)).⁵¹ Although this is attractive, it does not suit, for Jerusalem is the *holy city* in which there is nothing *defiled* ([1–2](#)). What would be the point of the command to *touch no unclean thing*? Furthermore, if they go out to meet the Lord, would they not be his advanceguard and rearguard on the return journey, whereas Isaiah says quite the reverse? But if we treat the verse as packed with exodus motifs, it fits perfectly in its context. A great salvation has been effected in

⁵¹ Simon, pp. 196–197.

which the Lord's wrath is gone ([51:17–23](#)) and his people are established in holiness as a royal priesthood ([52:1ff.](#)). Now they are called to live according to their God-given dignity, which is what was asked of the Sinai people but could not be accomplished. *From there* is a really great difficulty for all who propose a Babylonian location for the prophet: how could he say *from there* if he meant 'from here'?⁵² In context, however, the call is to leave the whole setting and ambience of the old sinful life behind. In contrast to the exodus, when they were commanded to load themselves with the treasures of Egypt ([Ex. 12:35f.](#)), they are now commanded to *touch no unclean thing*. The ideas of contagion through touching ([Lv. 5:2](#)) and of 'carrying the vessels of the LORD' are characteristically priestly. [Numbers 1:50–51](#) is the only other place where 'carry' and *the vessels of the LORD* are found together. It refers to the levitical duty of portage of the tabernacle and its accoutrements. This was the 'burden' of the Levites ([Nu. 4:6, 14–15, 24–25](#)) and could be shared with no other ([Nu. 3:5–9](#)). In this way verse [11](#) matches verses [1–2](#). The people who wear the priestly garments of beauty perform priestly duties before the Lord, and all who *go out* in this greater exodus are priests. *Come out* is the same verb and form as verse [11a](#) and should be translated identically, 'Go out'. The *and* before *be pure* should be omitted. *Be pure* (the niphal of $\sqrt{bārār}$) is used of the preparation of 'trained' warriors ([1 Ch. 7:40](#)), of specially nurtured sheep ([Ne. 5:18](#)) and as a parallel to 'winnow' ([Je. 4:11](#)). It is strange that in such a priestly passage as this Isaiah should use a verb with far from priestly associations. He uses it elsewhere only in [49:2](#), of the Servant as a 'polished' arrow. Is this the reason he uses such an out-of-the-way verb here: to imply that as the Servant is, so must the Lord's people be? This would form a thought inclusio with [50:10–51:1](#), the beginning of this section. At all events, the verb conveys the broader sense of 'fitness' and 'preparedness' rather than the narrower sense of 'purity'.

[12](#) Two reasons (the verse opens with 'For' rather than *But*) are offered in support of the call to holy pilgrimage. First, negatively, there is no circumstantial justification for making an exception ([12ab](#)) and secondly, positively, there is every divine care and attention ([12cd](#)). *Leave* occurs for the third time (*cf.* verse [11ac](#)); Isaiah uses the verb 'go out'. This keynote of the passage is lost if the translation is arbitrarily varied as the NIV. The old situation can and must now be decisively left. *Haste* (*hippāzōn*) is found only in

⁵² The theory is usually protected by assuming that for the purposes of this oracle the prophet has 'ideally' stationed himself in Zion.

[Exodus 12:11](#), where it is used of the urgency with which those who eat the Passover must be committed to pilgrimage, and [Deuteronomy 16:3](#), in connection with the urgency to leave Egypt while the going was good. *Flight* (*m^enûsâ*) is found only in [Leviticus 26:36](#), referring to the desperate flight of those suffering the reward of disobedience. The reduplication of the idea is intended to underline that there will be no unwelcome pressure in the situation and nothing to distract the mind from calm commitment to walk with God in holiness. They will experience neither the panic flight of sinners under condemnation nor the opportunist escape of those whose master might change his mind, but rather every favourable circumstance. Furthermore, every divine care will be available, *for the LORD* will surround them with his guardian presence. They live, as it were, in a holy enclave. This forms an inclusio with the image of the caring warrior and shepherd in [40:10–11](#), and the imagery comes from [Joshua 6:9](#). Only there and in [Numbers 10:25](#) does *m^eassēp* have the meaning ‘rearguard’. The Joshua picture is exact, with guards marching before and behind the priests bearing the holy vessels. Even so does the Lord guard his priestly people. The exodus imagery of the fiery-cloudy pillar ([Ex. 13:21](#)) is a contributory motif, for in their need ([Ex. 14:19](#)) they found that the pillar, which had led them, moved to protect their rear. Even so *the LORD ... the God of Israel* surrounds them.

5. The arm of the Lord: the triumph of the Servant (52:13–55:13)

This division of the book of the Servant is in two parts: the fourth Servant Song ([52:13–53:12](#)) and the great double tailpiece attached to it ([54:1–17](#); [55:1–13](#)). In it the delineation of the Servant and his work is completed. As for the Servant himself, the suffering which began to cast its shadow over the second Song ([49:4](#); cf. [49:7](#)), and which formed the heart of the third Song ([50:6](#)), is now explained as the wounding and bruising of one who bore the sins of others. And on the basis of this sin-bearing work, Zion is called into the covenant of peace ([54:10](#)) and the whole world into an everlasting covenant ([55:3](#)). Thus, the double task committed to the Servant ([49:6](#)) has been accomplished. Furthermore, like its predecessors, the fourth Song is comfortable in its context. The three calls to hear promises of a Zion-centred, universal and righteous salvation ([51:1–8](#)) and the three matching calls to enjoy the reality of the promised blessings

(51:17–52:12) were separated by an appeal to the arm of the Lord for action (51:9). Throughout 51:17–52:12 Isaiah allowed the suspense to mount: something must have happened, but what? Now we meet the arm of the Lord (53:1), who accomplishes peace with God (53:5; 54:10), establishes people in righteousness (53:11; 54:17) and summons the whole world to pardon (55:6–7) and pilgrimage (55:12). Indeed, the ‘You will go out’ of 55:12 uses the same verb as 52:11–12, and the Eden promises of 51:1–3 are fulfilled in 55:12–13. Thus, the single ‘See’/‘Behold’ of 52:13 is the climax of the whole series of commands which began at 51:1 and brings the promises (51:1–8) and blessings (51:17–52:12) to rest on the person and work of the Servant, by whom all is accomplished.

a. Witnesses, divine and human, to the sin-bearing, dying, living and victorious Servant (52:13–53:12)

The fourth Servant Song is a balanced presentation:⁵³

A¹ Enigma: exaltation and humiliation (52:13–15)

The Lord’s testimony to his Servant (13) merging (14) into a description of the Servant’s suffering and of reactions to it

B Revelation: human testimony, based on divine revelation, witnessing to the fact and meaning of the Servant’s suffering and death (53:1–9)

B¹ Suffering observed and misunderstood (1–3)

B² Suffering explained (4–6)

B³ Suffering, voluntary and undeserved (7–9)

A² Solution: exaltation through sin-bearing suffering (10–12)

The explanation of the Servant’s suffering (10–11b) merging into the Lord’s testimony to his Servant (11c–12)

The opening and closing sections (52:13–15; 53:10–12) taken together follow an a-b-b-a pattern where a is the Lord speaking about ‘my Servant’ and b is descriptions/explanations of the Servant’s experiences. In 52:13–15 the b style simply takes over from the a

⁵³ Note also that the five stanzas of the poem, as indicated in the outline, can be arranged respectively with nine, ten, eleven, twelve and thirteen lines, matching the mood of mounting excitement in the poem itself.

style and vice versa in 53:10–12. Only in these sections does the key concept of the ‘many’ occur (52:14a, 15a; 53:11c, 12a [great], 12e). So much of the enigma and dramatic intensity of the poem focuses in the ‘many’; they start back from the sufferer only to find, once the truth has been revealed, that in his suffering lies their highest benefit. Further, in these sections the Servant is brought into touch with earth’s great ones, the kings (52:15) and the strong (53:12), and the note of his triumph is sounded; in 52:13 *act wisely* includes the sense ‘act successfully’ and these two meanings are matched by *prosper* and *knowledge* (53:10–11). Within the poem, B¹ and B³ (53:1–3, 7–9) are ‘story’ sections, concerned with the birth and life of the Servant and with his trial, death and burial. Each offers two explanatory similes, the botanical imagery of *shoot* and *root* (2) and the animal imagery of *lamb* and *sheep* (7). B² (4–6) forms the heart of the poem, the revelation without which (according to verse 1) the Servant cannot be understood: his sufferings were properly ours. Our estimate that he suffered under the rod of God was marvellously true, though not in the sense intended. For his sufferings were caused by our sins and achieved our peace, through the personal, deliberate act of the Lord himself. But though verses 4–6 stand alone they also prepare for the final explanations in verses 10–12. There is a common emphasis involving twelve separate words on the theme of suffering. In particular there is the shared vocabulary of ‘sickness’ (4, 10; *caused ... to suffer* is ‘made sick’), crushing (5, 10) and sin-bearing (the two verbs *took up* ... [√ *nāśā*] and *carried* [√ *sābal*] in verse 4 appear in reverse order in verse 11 [*bear*] and verse 12 [*bore*]). This a-b-b-a pattern (like that in 52:13–15 and 53:10–12 above) is intended to convey rounded completeness. Finally, with a subtlety worthy of Isaiah, a single verb in its two shades of meaning concludes the two sections: in verse 6 the Lord *laid*/‘made to meet’ *on him* our iniquity (√ *pāḡa*^c with preposition *b^e*), and in verse 12 he *made intercession* (√ *pāḡa*^c with preposition *l^e*).

Enigma: the Servant’s exaltation and humiliation (52:13–15)

The threefold exaltation of the Servant (13) is followed by the deepest of contrasts: a revulsion from him caused by a suffering which consumed both his individuality and his humanity (14). The suffering, however, has world-wide effect, touching *many nations* (15a) and bringing kings to submission (15b) through a new experience and understanding of the truth (15cd).

13 See (*hinnēh*, ‘Behold’) has a threefold function: (i) By beginning this Song with

hinnēh ‘abdî ('Behold my Servant') Isaiah brings to a rounded climax the revelation of the Servant which began with *hēn ‘abđi* ('Behold my Servant') in 42:1. (ii) The command to 'Behold' concludes the series of commands which began at 51:1; the Servant is the awaited explanation of the predicted universal salvation with all its related blessings. (iii) *hinnēh* makes a contextual link with 'Behold me!' ('Yes, it is I') in 52:6. The Lord there promised action on behalf of his people in which he would be personally present, and this was followed by his personal coming to Zion (8) after he had bared his arm in salvation (10). It is in the Servant that the Lord fulfils these promises. *Act wisely* ($\sqrt{\text{śākāl}}$) combines wisdom and effectiveness; the wisdom of true prudence, not in the weak sense of caution but in the true sense of knowing exactly what to do in order to bring about the intended result (cf. 1 Sa. 18:30). Clines translates it, 'See, my servant: his wisdom prospers.'⁵⁴ (Cf. 'prospering' and 'knowledge' in 53:10–11.) Isaiah likes combining verbs of exaltation (cf. 2:12–13 with 57:7 and especially 6:1; 33:10; 57:15). The three-fold exaltation (*raised ... lifted up ... highly exalted*) expresses a dignity beyond what any other merits or receives and is surely intended as a clue leading to the identity of the Servant. It is impossible not to be reminded of the resurrection, ascension and heavenly exaltedness of the Lord Jesus.

14–15 It is usual to understand the *Just as ... so* formation of these verses as the NIV suggests: the first 'so' clause (14b) explaining *appalled* (14a) and the second (15a) complementing the *as* of (14a). This is not free of difficulty. If we suppose the translation *sprinkle* to be correct, we have to ask in what sense would the Servant's 'sprinkling' of *many* be related to their reaction of horror ('Just as they were appalled ... so he will sprinkle'). Is it meaningful to say that the extent of their horror determines the extent of his sprinkling? The efficacy of the act cannot be limited by the reaction it provokes. On the other hand, if the word should mean 'startle' (see the NIV mg.), presumably we might find some comparison between 'just as there were many ... appalled ... so there will be many nations whom he will startle'. Apart from wondering if this comparison would be worth making, the emphasis which it requires on *many* (14a) and *many nations* (15a) is not supported by the Hebrew. Another view of the structure is worth suggesting. Hebrew, like English, does not always express the 'so' which complements the 'as' clause. In the present instance, the horror of the many (14a) is elaborated by a double

⁵⁴ D. J. A. Clines, *I, He, We and They: A Literary Approach to Isaiah 53*, JSOTS, 1 (1976), p. 11.

explanation (pointing to what they see; 14bc), and the silence of the kings (15b) also has a double explanation (pointing to what they hear; 15cd). This is a true comparison: on the basis of human observation, the Servant's sufferings arouse revulsion, but a very different reaction arises from understanding what he has done. If this comparison provides the basic structure, then *so will he sprinkle*/‘startle’ is parallel and consequent to *so disfigured*, a hint at the inner meaning of such suffering and the pivot of the stanza:

A¹ A reaction of revulsion (14)

B¹ Appearance so marred (14b)

B^{1a} Form so dehumanized (14c)

C Suffering that sprinkles/startles (15a)

A² A reaction of submission (15b)

B² Something never told (15c)

B^{2a} Something never heard (15d)

14 *Many* is a theological term within the Song, referring to the whole company for whose benefit the Servant acts (15a, 11c, 12ae). It appears here for the first time and provides a telling contrast ‘with the one, the solitary ... servant’.⁵⁵ *Appalled* ($\sqrt{\text{šāmam}}$, ‘shocked, shattered’) is a very strong word used of places devastated (49:8, 19) and a bereaved wife (54:1). *At him* is ‘at you’ (see the NIV mg.). Such a sudden change to the second person makes difficulties for translators but is an established feature of Hebrew ‘poetry and high style ... a primitive stylistic device’⁵⁶ (cf. 54:1); hence, ‘at you—one whose appearance ... and whose form ...’. *So disfigured* is ‘such a disfigurement’. The noun (*mišhat*) occurs only here but is unexceptionable. *Man* refers to individuality; *human likeness*/‘sons of man’, to common humanity. The thought is not that the Servant suffered more than any other individual or more than other humans but that he experienced disfigurement ‘from [being] an individual ... from [belonging with] humankind’, so that those who saw him stepped back in horror not only saying ‘Is this the Servant?’ but ‘Is this human?’

15 *Sprinkle* ($\sqrt{\text{nāzā}}$) is here in the hiphil (*hizzâ*). Neither *sprinkle* or ‘startle’ (RSV) is free of difficulty. In the meaning ‘sprinkle’ it occurs twenty-two times in the Old Testa-

⁵⁵ Muilenburg, p. 617.

⁵⁶ North, *Second Isaiah*, p. 227.

ment but always with the liquid sprinkled as its direct object, never (as here) with that on which the sprinkling occurs as its direct object. Some, therefore, trace the form to an Arabic root ‘to leap, spring up’, taken here in the emotional sense (‘You made me jump’), ‘to startle’.⁵⁷ But this also has its problems (see North).⁵⁸ This is because the Arabic verb is not exemplified in the required emotional meaning and, therefore, necessitates importing into the Old Testament a verb not elsewhere found in a meaning not elsewhere exemplified. It is odd, surely, to deal with one small novelty by importing a collection of others! Compared with this it seems a small matter to see the MT as involving a well-established verb with a small variation from exemplified usage (cf. Muilenburg).⁵⁹ We noted above how the central section of the Song (4–6) shares its vocabulary and teaching with the concluding section (10–12). The question, therefore, is prompted whether this opening section, which also has links with verses 10–12, begins to point towards the same cultic interpretation of the Servant’s death. Blocher rightly says that ‘the burden of proof ... rests with those who would reject “sprinkle”’.⁶⁰ Yet the usage is uncommon. Isaiah, however, could well have used it so, intending to increase the sense of enigma, which marks this stanza, about how the unique exaltation and unique suffering belong together. What is it that kings hear that dumbfounds them? So, the Servant ‘shall sprinkle ... many nations’; his work is priestly and *many nations* receive his priestly ministry, but what is the purifying agent? The addition of *nations* to the keyword *many* is unexpected but should be compared to the equally unexpected ‘Galilee of the nations’ (9:1 <8:23>). Isaiah’s Messianism is intrinsically universal. The *and* before

⁵⁷ The LXX’s *thaumasontai* (‘they will marvel’) has suggested emendation to *yirgezû* (‘[many nations] will tremble’), though as a matter of fact the LXX never uses *thaumazō* as an equivalent for $\sqrt{rāgaz}$. Others urge that here *hizzâ* is used absolutely (‘[many nations] will perform purificatory rites’). This involves, of course, a singular verb with a plural subject and, in continuation of the interpretation this translation requires, the kings keep their mouths shut less they contract infection from such a loathsome object as the Servant!

⁵⁸ North, *Second Isaiah*, p. 228.

⁵⁹ It is not a foregone conclusion that the thing on which the sprinkling is made is never a direct object of *hizzâ*. In Lv. 4:16–17 (cf. verse 4) ‘*et-pēnê* could be such, though it is possibly more idiomatic to understand it as in Gn. 19:13, 27; 33:18.

⁶⁰ H. Blocher, *The Songs of the Servant* (IVP, 1975), p. 61.

kings should be omitted (cf. 49:7, where princes prostrate themselves to one just called ‘the servant of rulers’). The thought of the Servant’s supreme exaltation (13) is elaborated by this picture of earth’s rulers silent before him. $\sqrt{qāpās}$ (*shut their mouths*) is not used elsewhere of closing the mouth. Equivalent expressions describe silence from shock (Jb. 40:4). We must think, therefore, of the kings as overwhelmed by the Servant, but the precise cause of their silence is not explained. The ideas of *see* and *understand/‘discern’* indicate that some truth about the Servant has dawned on them, but how and what we have yet to find out. The enigma is maintained to the end of the stanza; somehow the unique exaltation (13) and the unique suffering (14) are the subject of a unique truth (15).

Revelation: human testimony, based on divine revelation, witnessing to the fact and meaning of the Servant’s suffering and death (53:1–9)

Suffering observed and misunderstood (53:1–3)

This second stanza links with the end of the first. There, the true understanding of the Servant is dumbfounding; here, it is communicated by divine revelation, a *message ... revealed*. Without such revelation, who could believe that this one, with his birth and early life, his unimpressive appearance, was the arm of the Lord? Does it not rather stand to reason that he was despised? The theme is presented in alternating ‘we’ and ‘he’ sections:

A¹ A believing company brought into being through revelation (1)

B¹ The Servant’s birth: unimpressive and unpromising (2ab)

A² First reactions of those who later believed: unimpressed (2cd)

B² The Servant’s experience in life: popular rejection (3ab)

A³ Unvalued by those who later believed (3cd)

B¹ and B² are consecutive, moving from birth to life. They also embody a contrast: the Servant before God and before people. A² and A³ reinforce the message of A¹ that the knowledge of the Servant is only through revelation.

1 At some point a believing company came into existence, but there was a time when even they *esteemed him not* (3). The true reply to the first question, therefore, is ‘No-one’, and the second question purposed to explain why this is so. There can be no belief without prior divine revelation; on the basis of human observation alone (2cd, 3ab)

there is no discernment of who the Servant really is. *Believed* (*he’emîn l^e*) means to believe what is said, to believe facts (cf. Gn. 45:26; Dt. 9:23). The prophet speaks for those who later came to faith but identifies them with a whole company of spectators who looked at the Servant without understanding. *Our message* is used of the word given to the prophet by God (28:9, 19; Je. 49:14) and is widely used elsewhere for ‘news’ or ‘information’ (1 Sa. 2:24; 4:19). Clines paraphrases *the arm* [better, Arm] of the LORD, ‘Where has God’s power ever been seen—but here?’ and comments that ‘the poet is denying that God’s arm (power) has ever been revealed previously’.⁶¹ This opens the correct perspective but needs to be taken further. We noted at 51:9 how the ‘Arm of the Lord’ is not someone/something apart from the Lord but is the Lord himself in all his power. (Cf. Ps. 44:3 <4>, where ‘hand’, ‘arm’ and ‘light of face’ occur together, i.e. the Lord’s personal presence in personal action; cf. 40:10; 51:9; 59:16.) In Deuteronomy 7:18–19 the acts of the arm were seen while the arm remained invisible, but now it is not a matter of tracing events to an invisible cause but a matter of seeing a person, the Servant, and recognizing that he is the Lord present in power. In 51:9 the arm was called to awake; 52:6 pledged the Lord’s own presence; 52:8 foresaw the Lord visibly coming to Zion; 52:10 noted that the arm had been bared in saving action. Now at last the arm has come, not simply a person behind and through whom the Lord’s power is at work, nor just one signally (even uniquely) upheld by the Lord’s power, but ‘the Arm’ himself, the Lord come to save.

2 This verse opens with the conjunction ‘and’ in its explanatory sense: ‘You see ...’. Why did the message of the Servant and the revelation of him as ‘the Arm’ meet with dismissiveness? First, he seemed to have a wholly earthly or natural origin: the imagery of growth out of the soil points to a human ‘family tree’ (cf. ‘is not this the carpenter’s son?’, Mt. 13:55). How could a mere man be ‘the Arm of the Lord’? Secondly, he *grew up before him*, i.e. before the Lord. How can he be ‘the Arm of the Lord’ if he is a distinct person over against the Lord, growing up in his presence? Thirdly, there was no evidence of any speciality or distinctiveness (2cd). Yet Isaiah’s imagery pointed to the truth for those who had eyes to see, for he reintroduces here the Messianic imagery of 4:2, the ‘holy seed’ imagery of 6:13 and the royal imagery of 10:33–11:1. We ‘feel’ what Isaiah was doing if we recall how blandly the people dismissed the Messianic status of Jesus on the

⁶¹ Clines, *Isaiah* 53, p. 15.

ground that he came from Nazareth, not Bethlehem ([Jn. 7:41–42](#)). The truth was so near for any with a will to seek it and eyes to see it. With *beauty*, *majesty*, and *appearance* Isaiah continues to register the impression the Servant made outwardly. The words translated *beauty* (*tō’ar*) and *appearance* (*mar’eh*) are used of Rachel in [Genesis 29:17](#) (she ‘was lovely in form and beautiful’). *Majesty* signifies the outward impressiveness expected of an important person ([Ps. 96:6](#)). The Servant was not, therefore, noticeably ‘well-built ... impressive ... handsome’. The NIV and RV represent different ways of punctuating the Hebrew text, the latter following the traditional Massoretic punctuation. Nothing depends on this either way and the NIV offers a clearer parallelism. With every appearance of being a man among men—and not outstanding at that—it was not easy to believe that he could be the Lord come to save.

3 Consequently, far from following him, they shunned him. The repetition of *despised* in the first and last lines is a typically Isaianic palistrophe. $\sqrt{bāzā}$ ('to despise') is not used elsewhere in Isaiah, but the related $\sqrt{bûz}$ ([37:22](#)) gives the sense—vaunting, dismissive, mocking. *Rejected by men* (*hādal ’išim*) is a disputed rendering. The verb means ‘to cease, forbear’, and some (e.g. Clines) urge that the adjective must be active, ‘withdrawing from men’.⁶² A reference, however, to the Servant’s reaction to people would be out of context here in a section which stresses their reaction to him, and Clines’ comment that knowing his ugliness the Servant withdrew from society goes far beyond what verse 2 implies. But $\sqrt{hādal}$ is versatile. In [Exodus 9:29](#) it is used absolutely meaning ‘to cease’; in [Psalm 39:4 <5>](#) it is an adjective meaning ‘transient’; [Isaiah 2:22](#) translates it ‘to refuse credence to’ and [Ezekiel 3:27](#) uses it in the sense of ‘dismissive, unresponsive’. We need, therefore, to consult contextual exactness with a word which bends itself to various shades of meaning. ‘To come to an end’ would lead to an adjectival equivalent, ‘lacking, running out of’, suitable to the present passage. The human eye saw a man among men, of human ancestry, with no special dignity, and as the object of scorn he was left ‘lacking in’ adherents. The rare plural *men* (*’išim*) is found only in [Psalm 141:4](#) and [Proverbs 8:4](#) and is used, according to Muilenburg, for poetic assonance with the immediately following singular *’iš*, thus throwing into prominence the isolated individuality of the Servant who continued to be the ‘one’ in contrast to the ‘many’.

The reappearance of *sorrows* in verse 4 indicates that Isaiah is not using *a man of sor-*

⁶² Clines, *Isaiah 53*, p. 16.

rows as the stereotyped language of lament (*cf.* Westermann)⁶³ but is being realistic and descriptive. If verse 3 stood alone we would be left to think that the Servant was burdened with a morose temperament and a sickly body, but verses 4 and 10 fill out the picture. The Servant was not an incessant sorcerer and sufferer but he was notably so, not by reason of his constitution but because he took our sorrows and weaknesses as his own. *Familiar with* ($\sqrt{yāda}$) means either ‘to know’ and hence ‘with personal experience of’, or is a homonym meaning ‘submissive to/humbled by’,⁶⁴ and either meaning suits. Both the experience and the willing acceptance of *suffering*/‘sickness’ (more in the sense of weakness than of illness) matches Isaiah’s portrait of the Servant. *Like one from whom men hide their faces* is ‘And [there was] as it were a hiding of face from him’. Refusal to follow developed into shunning. *Esteemed* is an ‘accounting’ word, a reckoning up of value. When all that the human eye saw and the human mind apprehended was added up the result was zero. With this word, Isaiah completes a diagnosis of our human condition, which he has been unobtrusively pursuing throughout these three verses: to see the Servant and find *no beauty* in him (2cd) reveals the bankruptcy of the human emotions; to be one with those who despise and then reject him (3ac) exposes the misguidedness of the human will; to appraise him and conclude that he is nothing condemns our minds as corrupted by, and participants in, our sinfulness. Thus every aspect of human nature is inadequate; every avenue along which, by nature, we might arrive at the truth and respond to God is closed. Nothing but divine revelation can make the Servant known to us and draw us to him.

Explanation: the Servant’s vicarious suffering, our sin and the Lord’s will (53:4–6)

‘The servant is indeed characterized by griefs and sorrows, but they were not his own.’⁶⁵ This is the way in which verses 4–6 explain verse 3. What the human eye missed, what can be known only by revelation, is now stated in the section which constitutes the heart of the poem (see the outline above). Its eleven lines fall into two sets of four (4–5) and one of three (6). While each of these has its distinctive truth to impart, there are common lines throughout, which we may note in a preliminary way.

⁶³ Westermann, p. 262.

⁶⁴ D. W. Thomas, *Record and Revelation* (OUP, 1938), pp. 393ff.

⁶⁵ Young, p. 345.

a. The Servant was alone in his sufferings. Verse 4 contains two emphatic subjects, *He* and *we*, and though his sufferings (4ab) were for us we had no part in them, for we stood aloof, reckoning that he must have deserved all he suffered (4cd). There is one emphatic subject in verse 5, *he*, and this initial stress is reflected in what follows: *he was crushed ... upon him ... his wounds*. While he thus deals with our moral and spiritual needs and our broken personhood we are not even mentioned except as contributors of the sin which caused his pain. There are two emphatic subjects in verse 6, *All we* and *the LORD*. While the Servant suffers we are still straying, and the Lord, acting as high priest in relation to the Victim-Servant (6c; cf. Lv. 16:21), loads him with our wrong. Thus the Servant suffers in isolation from humanity and in distinction from the Lord; he suffers under our sin and under the Lord's hand.

b. He acted by means of substitution. According to verse 4ab, the Servant lifts up and loads our needs on to himself, and in verse 5ab his sufferings were the penalty which he paid for our transgressions. According to verse 5c, the chastisement essential to our peace with God fell on him, and it was 'at the price of his wounds' that we have healing (5d). The substitutionary imagery of verse 6c is drawn straight from Leviticus 16.

c. The Servant dealt with every aspect of our need. With all the *infirmities* and *sorrows* that blight our lives (4), and the moral and spiritual wrong and guilt that alienates God (5). Positively, in respect of the former he brings us healing (5d), and in respect of the latter, peace (5c).

d. His work of suffering fulfilled the will of God. While we were straying (6ab), the Servant's willing sin-bearing was being met by the divine action of sin-imposition. In his Servant, the Lord was dealing with all that merited his wrath. The Servant is the lamb of God.

4 With neither co-operation nor understanding from us, the Servant took on himself all that blights our lives. *Surely* ('ākēn; cf. 40:7) is a conjunction emphasizing the unexpected. Whatever people may have thought about the sorrows and sufferings they saw, the truth was dramatically different. *He* is an emphatic pronoun. *Took up* ($\sqrt{nāšā}$) means 'to lift up' (off someone, in this case) and *carried* ($\sqrt{sābal}$, 'to shoulder') is to take as one's own burden. *Infirmities*, translated *suffering* in verse 3b, is the 'weakness' of sickness, which coupled with *sorrows* encapsulates all that mars our lives. We wish for more than we are able to achieve, so that the good life is always eluding us; we long for a

truly happy life but are constantly baulked by sorrow in whatever form it may come—disappointment, bereavement, tragedy, whatever. But he made our burdens his ([Mt. 8:17](#); [Rev. 21:4](#)). Yet *we* is an emphatic pronoun, contrasting with *he* and isolating him in his substitutionary work. *Considered* is translated *esteemed* in verse [3d](#). The verb *stricken* (omit *by God* which belongs to and should be attached to *smitten*; see below) is used sixty times in [Leviticus 13–14](#), not of the disease of leprosy but of the infliction or ‘blow’ of it (*cf.* [1 Ki. 8:37–38](#); [Ps. 73:14](#), the only other places where precisely this form of the verb occurs). *Smitten* ‘by God’ and *afflicted* express the objective and subjective sides of his suffering: the divine agent and the personal experience of being brought low, humbled, humiliated.

5 The Servant went deeper in his work for us, dealing with our sinful state ([5ab](#)), our alienation from God ([5c](#)) and our broken personhood ([5d](#)). *He* is an emphatic pronoun, pointing to the Servant in splendid isolation as he tackles our need. *Pierced* ($\sqrt{hālāl}$) is found in Isaiah only at [51:9](#), where it is used of the death wound to the dragon. It usually means ‘to pierce fatally’ ([Jb. 26:13](#); [Ps. 109:22](#)). When they recalled how ‘the Arm of the Lord’ pierced the dragon after they had called for him to act ([51:9–10](#)), could they have foreseen they were calling him, himself, to be pierced to death? *Crushed* ($dākā'$) is used of people being trampled to death, the infliction and enduring of crushing agonies ending in death ([La. 3:34](#)). *For* is the preposition *min*, meaning ‘from’, hence ‘arising from, resulting from, because of’. Delitzsch says the Hebrew word

... does not answer to the Greek *hypo* but to *apo* ... not that it was our sins and iniquities that had pierced him ... but that he was pierced and crushed on account of our sins ... *ours*, which he had taken upon himself ... that were the cause of His having to suffer so cruel and painful a death.⁶⁶

Thus, verse [4](#) demands the noun ‘substitution’, and verse [5](#) adds the adjective ‘penal’. *Transgressions* (*pešā'*; for the noun *cf.* [43:25](#); [44:22](#); [50:1](#); for the verb *cf.* [1:2](#), [28](#); [46:8](#)) is the wilfulness and rebelliousness of sin, the deliberate flouting of the Lord and his law. *Iniquities* ($\bar{a}wōn$; *cf.* $\sqrt{\bar{a}wā'}$, ‘to bend, bend double’; [Ps. 38:6](#) [\(7\)](#)) reflects the bentness or pervertedness of human nature, the result of the fall and the ever-flowing fount of sin. But by his death the Servant bore our *punishment* (*mûsār*). Dhorme commenting on

⁶⁶ Delitzsch, p. 318.

[Job 4:3](#) says, ‘The exact meaning of the verb in the piel is “to correct” whether by words, whence “teach”, or by chastisement, whence “punish”. The double meaning ... is also found in the noun.’ Just as ‘the covenant of [my] peace’ ([54:10](#)) expresses the compound thought ‘my peace-covenant’, so ‘the punishment of our peace’ means ‘our peace-punishment’, the punishment necessary to secure or restore our peace with God. *Peace* (*šālōm*) is from √ *šālēm* (‘to be whole or complete’), indicating a rounded wholeness comprising personal fulfilment, harmonious society and a secure relationship with God. Any of these can be isolated according to context; here it means the ‘peace with God’ whereby we are brought near to him and he is reconciled to us. Isaiah opened this sequence of oracles against the background of a peace that was lost ([48:18](#)). The Servant stepped forward ([49:1](#)) precisely because the wicked cannot enjoy peace ([48:22](#)) but needed one to bring them back to God ([49:5–6](#)). This work has now been done by his substitutionary, penal death. Where there was no peace ([48:22](#)) there will be, through the Servant’s peace-making work ([53:5](#)), a covenant of peace ([54:10](#)). (See also [9:6](#) < [7](#) >.)⁶⁷ *By* is the particle of price: ‘at the cost of’. *Wounds* (*habbūrā*) is used in [1:6](#) of wounds still open and untreated; therefore, here the sense is of the actuality of blows inflicted and experienced, lacerations (*cf.* [Ps. 38:5](#) < [6](#) >). *We are healed*/‘healing has been accomplished for us’ emphasizes the objective achievement more than the subjective enjoyment (*cf.* [6:10](#)). Isaiah uses ‘healing’ in a total sense: the healing of the person, restoring fulness and completeness, a mark of the Messianic day ([19:22](#); [30:26](#)).

6 The Servant’s accomplishment is a work of the Lord. The picture of straying sheep summarizes all our inadequacy and errancy of nature—our danger too, for the Bible stresses the peril of sheep without a shepherd. The imagery of ‘laying iniquity on’ summarizes all Isaiah has been teaching about the Servant’s substitutionary death. In form, the verse is a palistrophe (*cf.* [verse 3](#)) which begins with *All we* (*kullānū*) and ends with *us all* (*kullānū*). It has a beautiful internal rhyme (*gone astray ... turned is tā'inū ... pānīnū*), and instead of having a fourth line like the two preceding sections of this stanza ([4–5](#)) it has a long third line so that, abruptly, the emphasis of the whole stanza falls on

⁶⁷ ‘Peace’ means fulfilment, living or having lived a full life ([Gn. 15:15](#); [2 Ki. 22:20](#)); personal well-being, peace of mind and satisfaction ([Gn. 43:23, 27](#); [1 Sa. 1:17](#)); things going well ([2 Sa. 11:7](#); [Ps. 73:3](#); [Is. 45:7](#)); absence of war etc. ([Lv. 26:6](#); [Dt. 20:10](#)); harmony ([Gn. 26:29, 31](#); [1 Sa. 16:4](#)); and peace with God ([Nu. 25:12](#); [Jdg. 6:23](#); [Ps. 85:8, 10](#) < [9,11](#) > ; [Is. 27:5](#); [48:22](#); [57:2](#)).

and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all. We all and each expresses both common culpability and individual responsibility. We cannot blame a ‘herd instinct’ even though we are all alike implicated. Over against the common herd, and matching the individual need, there stands *him* on whom our iniquity was laid. *And the LORD* is the emphatic subject. Isaiah delicately corrects any misunderstanding involved in ‘smitten by God’ in verse 4, while at the same time safeguarding its truth. *Has laid* ($\sqrt{pāgā}$) could be ‘laid’ (the verb is aoristic). The simple verb means ‘to meet, reach, to arrive at’; the causative form can mean ‘to intercede for’ (12), but here it means ‘to cause to arrive at, to make to meet’. By the divine act, the Servant was the meeting point for *the iniquity of us all*. We find no fault with Birks when he takes the verb to mean ‘to light, in hostile encounter, whether as many burdens on one shoulder or as many shafts aimed at one common target. Each sin of every sinner would be like a separate wound in the heart of this man of sorrows.’⁶⁸ Thus he was indeed ‘smitten by God’. The Servant is not an expedient which we hopefully proposed, nor one moved only by personal compassion and voluntariness; he is the provision and plan of God, who himself superintends the priestly task (Lv. 16:21) of transferring the guilt of the guilty to the head of the Servant, giving notice that this is indeed his considered and acceptable satisfaction for sin.

The Servant’s final act: his voluntary, undeserved death and the mystery of his burial (53:7–9)

The outline above shows that this fourth stanza of the poem continues the story of the Servant on from his origin and life (1–3) to the point where he was led out to die. There is also an important verbal link with verses 4–6. In verse 4d he was described as *afflicted*, and the same verb ($\sqrt{‘ānā}$) reappears in verse 7a, but in a reflexive form, (lit.) ‘... and he, for his part, humbled himself’ (cf. the NEB, ‘he submitted to be struck down’). This is the emphasis of the present stanza: the clear-headed, self-restraining voluntariness with which the Servant approached and accepted what happened. The human eye (4cd) saw him at the mercy of hostile, and even divine, forces; the theologically instructed eye (6) saw the hand of the Lord fulfilling the Servant’s death as a sin-bearing exercise. Now, however, we stand on a very sacred spot indeed, within the Servant’s own consciousness, and we see him, not caught in a web of events, but masterfully

⁶⁸ T. R. Birks, *Commentary on the Book of Isaiah* (Macmillan, 1878), p. 264.

deciding, accepting and submitting. As Clines puts it, ‘the servant ... does nothing and says nothing but lets everything happen to him.’⁶⁹ The term ‘lets’ is possibly weaker than is justified in that it obscures the firm and deliberate self-submission of which Isaiah speaks. The Servant’s tongue and mind were alike disciplined to say an unequivocal ‘yes’ to injustice and to a death he did not deserve. The three sections of this twelve-line stanza are full of intriguing difficulties, yet the broad meaning is clear:

A Procession. The Servant led out to die: his willingness ([7](#))

B Execution. The Servant’s death: thoughtless contemporaries ([8](#))

C Burial. The mystery surrounding the burial of one who did not deserve to die ([9](#))

References to the Servant’s *mouth* form an inclusio to the first section ([7bd](#)) and to the whole stanza ([7b](#), [9d](#)). The three sections consist, respectively, of five, four and three lines, giving a ‘tailing off’ effect as the Servant is brought to the grave.

[7](#) The Servant offered no physical resistance to violence but ‘humbled himself’ ([7a](#)); he offered no verbal resistance but *did not open his mouth*. Animals go as uncomprehendingly to slaughter as to shearing; the Servant who knew well, went to his death with a calmness reflecting not an ignorant but a submitted mind. What for them is the nature of the beast was for him a thought-out, voluntary course. The towering theological genius of Isaiah is nowhere more apparent than here. Substitutionary sacrifice lay at the heart of his own experience of God ([6:5–7](#)). Of all people, he knew the efficacy of the altar and the sacrifices God had appointed, yet (though he does not tell us how) somewhere between the profoundly real experience of [6:7](#) and the vision of the substitutionary role of the Servant in [52:13–53:12](#) the awareness dawned that (as [Hebrews 10:4](#) puts it) the blood of bulls and goats cannot take away sins. Within the horizons of the Old Testament this was daring in the extreme. Our brothers and sisters in the Old Testament church, as we meet them in the Psalms, were people in actual enjoyment of the benefits of forgiveness, peace with God and spiritual security. There is no suggestion that, under the old covenant, they knew that they enjoyed these benefits only on the ground of a perfect sacrifice yet to come. In every essential their position was the same as ours: the Lord attached promises (of forgiveness, peace, acceptance etc.) to the sacrifices and they offered the sacrifices, resting in faith on the promises. It took a man of

⁶⁹ Clines, *Isaiah 53*, pp. 64–65.

remarkable insight to see that something greater and better was needed. But this is what Isaiah did. He expressed the truth of the Servant's death in the accepted terminology of sin-bearing (4–6), and now (7–9) he introduces, and indeed drives home, a new thought. It is not that the Servant did not deserve to die (for that is implicit in verses 4–6) but that though he did not deserve to die he was willing to do so. In a word, the fatal flaw in existing substitutionary procedures was exposed and met in one stroke. For the point where animal substitution failed was also the point where sin is most serious. Sin as failure ($\sqrt{ḥāṭā}$; see verse 12) need be no more than a pity; sin as moral defect ($‘āwōn$; see verse 5) is distressing but leaves it arguable that what cannot be helped cannot be blameworthy; but sin as wilfulness ($\sqrt{pāšā’}$; see verse 5) is the thing God cannot overlook. It is the very heart of our sinfulness that we sin because we want to. We do not want ‘this man to reign over us’ (Lk. 19:14). Because of this, no animal can do more than picture substitution: only a person can substitute for a person; only a consenting will can substitute for a rebellious will. The Servant, indeed, fulfils the stated requirements for a substitute: he identified with sinners in their condemnation (4–5); he was without stain of our sin (9); he was acceptable to the holy God (6, 10). He also adds what no other ever did or could: the will to accept and submit to the substitute’s role. In *Isaiah 53*, and particularly in verses 7–9, Old Testament and biblical soteriology reaches its climax. *Oppressed* is elsewhere used as a taskmaster’s verb (Ex. 3:7), amenable to the thought of physical brutality (9:4 <3> ; 1 Sa. 13:6; cf. Ridderbos, ‘the tormenting nature of the treatment accorded Him’). And *afflicted* is ‘and for his part humbled himself’ (on this reflexive use cf. Ex. 10:3). The verb here is a participle, ‘kept himself in a state of submissiveness’. According to verses 6–7, it is we who merit the comparison with *a sheep* and *a lamb* but it was he who suffered it. *Lamb* (*seh*) was used regularly in the cultic laws (Gn. 22:7–8; Ex. 12:3, 5; Lv. 5:7), whereas *sheep* (*rāḥēl*) has no cultic use. This contrast between the animals shows that Isaiah is not here concerned with comparing the Servant’s death with, say, the Passover lamb, but with the fact that animals go with blind compliance whatever the destination. The Servant goes with knowing submission to what awaits him. The lamb here is led to an impending experience; the sheep is undergoing an actual experience; the Servant maintains his self-imposed silence both as he goes and as he endures.

8 Every word in the phrase *by oppression and judgment* gives rise to diversities of

meaning. The preposition *by* (*min*) is either separative ('from', hence 'apart from' or 'without') or causative ('arising from' or 'because of'; cf. verse 5). *Oppression* ('ōṣer, 'restraint') does not necessarily, but may contextually, involve 'oppression'. One of its two other occurrences in the Old Testament concerns a womb 'restrained' from conceiving (Pr. 30:16; cf. the cognate verb in Gn. 16:2; 20:18). In Psalm 107:28–30 the idea of oppression is possible but not necessary, for the reference is rather to any and every 'constraint' life imposes. The cognate ($\sqrt{\text{āṣar}}$) lacks the meaning 'oppress' (e.g. Dt. 11:17; 1 Sa. 21:5; Ne. 6:10). In the present case, therefore, we have either 'from restraint' (from having been arrested and imprisoned) or 'without restraint' (all ordinary restraints and protections removed). *Judgment* (*mišpāṭ*) is an extraordinarily versatile word but offers four appropriate meanings: a person's right (Dt. 18:3; 21:17); the practice of law or due process (Nu. 27:21; Dt. 1:17); legal enactment or sentence (Ex. 21:1, 31); and bringing a lawsuit (Nu. 27:5). Do we, therefore, say 'from justice' (from the court of law, due trial and sentencing) or 'without justice' (ignoring rights, without a proper trial)? In other words, we can underline the *fact* by saying 'from arrest and sentence', or the *victim* by saying 'without restraint and without right', or the *injustice* by saying 'without restraint and without justice'. All these are contextually satisfactory, though in the end D. F. Payne may be right in thinking that the Hebrew phrase is a set formula like 'due process of law'.⁷⁰ Calvin understood *taken away* ($\sqrt{\text{lāqah}}$, 'to take') in the technical sense illustrated in Genesis 5:24; 2 Kings 2:9; Psalms 49:15 <16>; 73:24. But a reference to removal to glory would be contextually inappropriate; there is no alleviation of the gloom yet. Rather, Proverbs 24:11 and Ezekiel 33:4 point the way: 'taken' is an ellipsis for 'taken out to die', an interpretation supported by the occurrence of *cut off* two lines further on.

The noun *descendants* (*dôr*) expresses 'circularity'. The cognate $\sqrt{dûr}$ ('to dwell'; Ps. 84:10 <11>) suggests the encircling town wall or the rampart round a camp. Applied to people, the noun suggests a group held together by some common factor (as in the book title *Edward Irving and his Circle*; cf. Pss. 49:19 <20>; 73:15). Genesis 6:9 would be suited by the translation 'contemporaries', the circle of his peers. It is never used *simpliciter* in the sense of *zera'* ('seed, descendants'). This tells against the NIV—beside the difficulty of knowing what the NIV's question means. *Speak* ($\sqrt{\text{sîah}}$) means 'to

⁷⁰ D. F. Payne, 'The Servant of the Lord: language and interpretation', *EQ*, xlivi 3 (1971), 135.

muse' ([Jdg. 5:10](#); [Ps. 119:23](#)) and hence 'to think aloud', 'to murmur' ([Jb. 7:11](#); Dhorme, 'to complain'), 'to mutter about' ([Ps. 69:12 <11>](#)) and 'to speak meditatively' ([Ps. 145:5](#)). Both Clines' suggestion ('Against his generation who protested?') and Blocher's ('who cared where he went?')⁷¹ sit too loosely to the Old Testament ambience of the word. 'And as for his contemporaries,⁷² who pondered?' fits in better with Isaiah's insistence that throughout the Servant went unrecognized and his sufferings aroused only misunderstanding.⁷³ Following this, we understand the next two lines as stating what the contemporaries failed to ponder: first, a fact open to any candid onlooker, that the Servant was done to death (*cut off*) and secondly, something known only by revelation, that he died 'for my people's rebellion'. In the light of the foregoing discussion, *For he was* should be translated 'That he was'.

Cut off ($\sqrt{gāzar}$) is a verb with an almost unbroken record of violence.⁷⁴ To translate 'he was cut down out of the land ...' catches the meaning. Whybray can only salvage his fancy that [Isaiah 53](#) does not require the actual death of the Servant by pleading that we need not take *from the land of the living*/'*out of the land*' literally.⁷⁵ But its Old Testament use is unequivocal ([Pss. 27:13; 116:9; 142:5 <6>](#); [Is. 38:11; Je. 11:19](#)): so truly did the Servant die that, like all the dead, he was removed from the world of the living. On *for* (*min*, 'because of') and *transgression* (*peša'*, 'rebellion') see verse 5. The whole phrase, as literally as possible, is 'Because of the rebellion of my people, the blow to him/to

⁷¹ Blocher, *Songs of the Servant*, p. 64.

⁷² On the prefix '*et*' in classical Hebrew', *VT*, XIV 3 (1964), 263ff. The particle is really one of emphasis and can be as well attached to a nominative as to an accusative. This greatly increases the range of possibility in the present case.

⁷³ The only difficulty (if difficulty it be) is that this understanding requires that the following *kî* introduces direct speech and there is no other example of 'to ponder' followed by a statement of the subject pondered.

⁷⁴ While $\sqrt{gāzar}$ means 'to decide' in [Est. 2:1](#); [Jb. 22:28](#) (see Dhorme's comment and the parallel shift in meaning in $\sqrt{hāraš}$ in [Is. 28:22](#)) it is otherwise used in a violent sense, e.g. of cutting a child in two ([1 Ki. 3:25f.](#)), felling a tree ([2 Ki. 6:4](#)), 'cutting off' a leper from the Lord's house ([2 Ch. 26:21](#)), separation from the Lord after death of those who die under his displeasure ([Ps. 88:5-6](#)), dividing the Red Sea ([Ps. 136:13](#)), a 'smash and grab' raid ([Is. 9:20-19](#)) and sudden death ([La. 3:54](#)).

⁷⁵ Whybray, p. 177.

them'.⁷⁶ If we take the preposition as a plural then, on the analogy of Psalm 95:4, the translation is '... my people whose was the blow/to whom the blow belonged'. If singular, then, 'because of the rebellion of my people the blow was his/came to him'. In either case the Servant endured the punishment which should, and otherwise would, have fallen on 'my people'. The plural understanding stresses the guilt of the people; the singular, the substitutionary role of the Servant. The possessive pronoun in *my people* indicates that a new speaker has appeared. Description (8a–c) has been replaced by affirmation (8d; cf. 11c following 11ab). Smart notes the same shift in 51:1–3 as one of the 'subtle marks of the author' whereby 'perhaps he shifted intentionally to a different speaker to enforce his point'.⁷⁷ References to 'my people' (51:4, 16; 52:4–6) suggest that it is the Lord who speaks here. However, as in 45:8 and 51:9, it could equally be Isaiah associating himself with his people as in 6:5, the point at which he himself found forgiveness through substitution. Was it when he announced their comfort (40:1) and the satisfaction for their sin (40:2) that he realized that his own case would be the paradigm of the Lord's ultimate solution? Was it then he realized that a richer blood than that of bulls and goats would be needed? Such a scenario is credible and would find an apt climax in the prophet's cry that 'because of the rebellion of my people he was stricken'.⁷⁸ The noun 'blow' (*neḡā'*) (see above) is related to the verb *stricken* (4c) and is used here as a corrective of the false estimate put there on the Servant's suffering. They thought he was *stricken ... by God*, and so he was, but in their place, for their guilt.

9 The verse begins (lit.) 'One assigned his grave/his grave was assigned with wicked ones and with a rich one in his deaths'. Thus two intriguing problems arise: why the change from plural ('wicked ones') to singular ('rich one')⁷⁹ and why the plural 'deaths'? Throughout the Old Testament, 'rich' ('āšîr) is only a collective when it stands in con-

⁷⁶ GKC 103f records that *lāmô* occurs fifty times as a plural ('to them') and at least nine times as a singular ('to him'). Is. 30:5 shows that the decision is always contextual.

⁷⁷ Smart, pp. 175, 199–200, 211.

⁷⁸ Clines and others prefer to follow Q^a in reading '*ammāw*' ('his people') instead of '*ammî*' ('my people'). But sudden shifts of perspective are well known in the prophets. North suggests reading '*ammē-*' ('peoples of a striking to them')/('who deserved to be stricken themselves').

⁷⁹ Emendations are suggested for 'āšîr ('rich'), e.g. (North, Whybray, Clines) '*ośēra'* ('evil doers'), (BHS) *s̄eṭirîm* ('demons').

trast to another singular representing a different class of person (*e.g.* the poor); in every other case the singular represents a singular and the plural a plural. Therefore, if Isaiah intended a simple contrast between a shameful and a sumptuous burial he would have used two singulars, but the use of a plural and a singular can only mean that he is not talking about classes but about persons. He seems to be saying that in the burial of the Servant, wicked people and a rich man were somehow involved.

On *death*/‘deaths’, the plural occurs only in [Ezekiel 28:10](#) (NIV, ‘death’), which offers no help. What are to us unexpected plurals are not, however, unknown in classical Hebrew, *e.g.* the plural ‘graves’ (NIV, ‘grave’; [Jb. 17:1, 21:32](#)), which [GKC 124c](#) and Dhorme class as ‘plurals of extension’, *i.e.* ‘graveyard/place of graves’. The same plural in [2 Kings 22:20](#) and [2 Chronicles 16:14](#) must be understood there as a plural of amplification/majesty, *i.e.* ‘his/your splendid/royal grave’. There is no ground for refusing to think that Isaiah is calling attention to the supreme quality of the Servant’s death (‘his supreme/magnificent death’), for surely it is far better to understand the text in the light of a known idiom than to emend to a word which nowhere else exemplifies a suitable meaning.⁸⁰ Young notes plurals like the words for ‘life’ and ‘youth’ and suggests a category which he calls customary plurals, *i.e.* plurals expressing a state—here underlining the reality of the Servant’s death. Henderson notes the plural ‘bloods’, signifying violently shed blood and understands ‘deaths’ as ‘the awful nature of that death to which our Lord submitted’.⁸¹ The only remarkable thing about the plural, therefore, is our surprise at finding it. In summary: since the Servant was condemned as a criminal, the natural expectation was that he would be brought to a criminal’s grave but, on the contrary, following a superb/real/violent death he was found ‘with a rich man’. The enigma of [52:13–15](#) (how could such suffering lead to such exaltation?) and of [53:1–3](#) (how could one so plainly human be ‘the arm of the LORD?’) is, therefore, compounded: how could a condemned man receive a rich man’s burial? North remarks that ‘we cannot assume that the word anticipates the burial of Jesus’,⁸² and Wade comments that the ‘association of the passage with the burial of our Lord ... seems unjustifiable’.⁸³

⁸⁰ The favoured alteration of *bəmōtô* (‘his burial mound’), but there is no indication that *bāmā* (‘high place’) can have this meaning (see Muilenburg).

⁸¹ E. Henderson, *The Book of the Prophet Isaiah* (Hamilton, Adams & Co, 1857), pp. 403–404.

⁸² North, *Second Isaiah*, p. 231.

Understandably, neither offers reasons for these assertions. Delitzsch has the ring of truth when he writes that ‘without the commentary supplied by the fulfilment, it would be impossible to understand verse 9 at all.’⁸⁴ Like the other enigmas of this Song, this too is written so that when the turn of events provides the explanation we shall know for certain that we stand in the presence of the Servant of the Lord.

Though ('al) can have the sense of ‘even though’ (i.e. he was condemned and brought to death [even] *though he had done no violence*; cf. Jb. 10:7; 16:7). Alternatively, it can mean ‘because’ (i.e. he came to unexpected honour in burial [because] he had done no violence; cf. 38:15; Ps. 119:136). *Violence* (*ḥāmās*) is active hostility planned (Pr. 10:6, 11) or performed (Gn. 49:5) against people; the violence of war (Joel 3:19 <4:19>); and a characteristic of life in this sinful world (Gn. 6:11, 13). *Deceit in his mouth* refers to wickedness of heart, ulterior motive, deceitfulness expressed in word. Together *violence* and *deceit* embrace the total guiltlessness of the Servant; in neither outward behaviour nor inner person, in neither deed nor word, could a charge be justly levelled. Sins of speech are widely noted in the Bible.⁸⁵ It was the sinful tongue that exposed to Isaiah his own guilt and that of his people (6:5; cf. 3:8), and it is no wonder, then, that he returns to this point to underline the perfection of the Servant. Succinctly, he is accorded that moral majesty essential in a true substitute for sinners (see on verse 7).

The Servant triumphant: exaltation through sin-bearing (53:10–12)

This final stanza is like a reservoir into which flow all the main lines of thought developed throughout the poem, but its chief links are with the first (52:13–15) and the third (53:4–6) stanzas. The ‘success’ and ‘exaltation’ themes of 52:13, 15 resurface as the Servant ‘prolongs his days’ (10c), and the Lord’s will ‘prospers’ through his agency (10d); finds personal fulfilment (11b); and takes the spoil (12ab). The theme of ‘the many’ (52:14–15) is thrice repeated in verses 11–12 (the same word is translated *great* in verse 12a). All this, coupled with the a-b-b-a pattern explained in the outline above, makes these final verses a true inclusio. Regarding the third stanza (4–6), it shares an

⁸³ Wade, p. 342.

⁸⁴ Delitzsch, p. 327.

⁸⁵ Throughout the Bible, guarded speech is commanded (Pr. 22:21; Mt. 5:37); lying forbidden (Lv. 19:11; Col. 3:9); and the tongue described as a danger (Jas. 3:2).

abundant vocabulary with verses 10–12. *Infirmities* (4a; cf. *suffering* in verse 3b) and *suffer* (10a) belong to the same word group; the bearing of our infirmities (4) was a divine visitation (10). The suffering of the Servant is expressed in verses 4–6 by word after word: *stricken*, *smitten*, *afflicted*, *pierced*, *crushed*, *punishment*, *wounds*. All this amplifies the ‘disfiguring’ of verse 14 and is finally summed up in *the suffering of his soul*—suffering penetrating to his inmost being (11a). The sacrifice theme of verses 4–6 (arising out of the ‘sprinkling’ of verse 15), expressed as sin-bearing (4), penal substitution (5), peace with God (5) and mediation (6), is repeated in verses 10–12. The two verbs of verse 4ab are used again, in reverse order (11d, 12d). Penal substitution is expressed as the guilt offering (10b), and the Lord’s satisfaction in what his Servant has done (peace and the ‘laying on’ of sin; verses 5–6) is affirmed in verse 10 (the will/pleasure of the Lord) and in the full reward of verse 12. The same verb concludes verses 6 and 12. In the former the Lord makes his Servant the sin-bearer, in the latter the Servant interposes himself on behalf of those whose sin he bears: he is thus the mediator between God and us (6) and us and God (12).

The first four lines (10) of this thirteen-line stanza are marked off by an inclusio (*the LORD’s will ... the will of the LORD*). They are a third-person report of the Servant’s place in the plan of God, whereas in the remaining nine lines (11–12) the Lord testifies about *my servant*, his righteousness (11) and the reward due to him because of the nature of his death (12). Notwithstanding, however, this fundamental twofold division of the stanza, there is an illuminating threefold pattern contained in it. In the first four lines (10) the Servant is doing the Lord’s will, in the final four lines (12c–f) he is meeting our needs, and in the middle five lines he is revealed in his own intrinsic worth. The verbal link between these three sections is the Servant’s ‘soul’ (*nepeš*) in verses 10b, 11a, 12c (the first and last, translated *life*). The uniting doctrinal theme is the understanding of the Servant’s death as a *guilt offering* (10b), a sin-bearing sacrifice which removes sin and imputes righteousness (11–12ab), and as a voluntary self-identification and interposition (12c–f).⁸⁶ Thus, finally the enigma posed by verses 13–15 is solved. The facts of

⁸⁶ Skinner recognizes that if the Servant be an individual then ‘his resurrection must be accepted as a literal fact, just as his death must be literally understood’. Whybray seeks to safeguard his autobiographical view of the Servant by denying that the Servant actually died: ‘The supposed references to the Servant’s vicarious suffering and death and resurrection are illusory’. He notes

verses 1–3 (his life and suffering) are explained in verses 4–6, and the facts of verses 7–9 (his voluntary, unjust death) are explained in verses 10–12, in which the last word about the Servant is spoken.

A The meaning and effects of the Servant's death (10)

a¹ The Servant's Divine pleasure (10a)
soul (1):

that in individual psalms of thanksgiving, the onset of trouble is depicted in 'death' terminology and its passing is seen as deliverance from death. In this sense the Servant was regarded as being 'as good as dead', 'but in fact it is not stated that he died'. He has to allow that *he was cut off*, if literally understood, must mean death, but he alludes to the cry 'I am cut off' (*La. 3:54*) as indicating that the verb can be used of the threat of death. He does not, however, take account of the difference between a cry of alarm at the plain approach of death and a factual statement that *he was cut off*. Nor does he note that the verb is supported by the words *from the land of the living*, that this experience was inflicted on the Servant because 'my people' had committed the capital crime of rebellion, and that it was followed by burial. The atonement vocabulary which Isaiah uses of the Servant is essentially a vocabulary of death. How are we to understand that the Lord laid on him the iniquity of us all except that he paid the price of sin by laying down his life? To say, as Whybray does, that the phrase to 'bear iniquity' ($\sqrt{nāšā}$ 'āwô̄n) does not occur in the poem is an unworthy quibble, for the equivalents to 'shoulder iniquity' ($\sqrt{sāḥal}$ 'āwô̄n) and 'bear sin' ($\sqrt{nāašā}$ *hēt*) do. to say that even if *nāšā* 'āwô̄n occurred it could not refer to 'vicarious punishment and suffering' in gone res th us of $\sqrt{nāšā}$ in *Nu. 18:1–2* and of $\sqrt{sāḥal}$ in *La. 5:7*. Cheyne was correct to understand verse 11 as 'an emphatic assertion of the vicarious atonement as the foundation of his righteous-making work'. Plainly, the vocabulary and ritual of the Day of Atonement (*Lv. 16*) lies behind Isaiah's thought in chapter 53. If he wished to use all this imagery of sin-bearing, returning again and again to words that cannot but recall it, and at the same time not intend that we should understand that the Servant died as the beasts in the ritual died, he would have to say so very plainly indeed. The same consideration applies to the guilt offering imagery of verse 10, for in every aspect of the guilt offering (*Lv. 5:14–6:7*) death is required, and there is no concessionary provision of a non-bloody offering (as in *Lv. 5:11–13*).

His death as a guilt offering
([10b](#))

The Servant's family ([10c](#))

The executor-Servant ([10cd](#))

B The Lord's testimony to his
Servant ([11–12](#))

a ² The Servant's soul (2):	His death as personal suffering (11a) The Servant satisfied (11b) Righteousness provided (11c) By sin-bearing (11d) Issuing in victory (12ab)
a ³ The Servant's soul (3):	His death as voluntary (12c) Voluntary identification (12d) Personal sin-bearing (12e) Mediatorial interposition (12f)

a² is linked with a¹ by the thought of the prospering Servant ([10d, 11a](#)); a³ is linked with a² as explanation attached to fact ([12bc](#)).

The Servant's death as a guilt offering ([53:10](#))

The first and fourth lines are an inclusio: the Lord performs his will upon his Servant, and the Servant undertakes executorship of the Lord's will. The middle lines are a conditional sentence, 'If and when ... then ...'. In verse [6](#) it was revealed that the Lord laid our iniquity on his Servant; this verse reveals that he did this not by any external compulsion but because he so willed and because it delighted him to do so. *The LORD* is the emphatic subject. *It was the LORD's will* is 'It was the Lord who willed/delighted

...’ ($\sqrt{hāpēš}$ means ‘to wish, will, desire, be pleased to’; cf. the noun *hēpēš* in 10d). Just as Cyrus ‘fulfilled all the Lord’s will and pleasure’ in the restoration of Jerusalem (44:28), so the heart of God is revealed in his delight, even at such cost, in finding and providing a guilt offering.⁸⁷ *Crush* is as in verse 5. In *and cause him to suffer* the Hebrew has no conjunction, and the idiom suggests ‘willed/was pleased to bring him to weakness by crushing him’.⁸⁸ The verb ($\sqrt{hālā}$) has appeared as a noun in verse 3 (‘suffering’) and verse 4 (‘infirmities’). ‘Sickness’ is personal suffering as endured by the sufferer in all its painfulness and weakness. The objective, divine imposition of crushing was subjectively endured.

In *and though the LORD makes his life a guilt offering, the LORD* is an interpretative addition which may or may not be correct. *Though* (‘im) can be translated ‘when/whenever’, and the ambiguities surrounding *makes* will be mentioned below. The function of the *guilt offering* was reparation or compensation. Wenham notes that it applied to offences against the Lord’s holy things and to offences against one’s neighbour, that it ‘draws attention to the fact that sin has both a social and a spiritual dimension’ and that the distinctive testimony of the guilt offering is satisfaction.⁸⁹ Thus, in the present verse the death of the Servant satisfied both the needs of sinful people before God and the ‘needs’/requirements of God in relation to his broken law and offended holiness. Though this central truth is clear, the way Isaiah expresses it raises two questions. First, as well as the word *guilt offering* (*’āšām*), two other words here derive directly from the vocabulary of the guilt offering in Leviticus. In Leviticus 5:17, the individual making the offering is described as a ‘soul’/‘person’ (*nepēš*, ‘soul'; translated *life* in verse 10) and the

⁸⁷ See especially Ps. 40:6–8<7–9>, where David has had a signal deliverance (verses 1–2) and is at a loss to find an adequate vehicle of thanksgiving. Authorized forms fail to match the divine pleasure (*lo’ hāpaštā*; verse 6<7>), but the avenue of consecrated obedience lies to hand (verse 8<9>). In Is. 53 the Servant gives perfect expression to this obedience (cf. 50:4–9) and the *lō’ hāpaštā* of Ps. 40 can become the *yhw̄ hāpēš* (‘the LORD was delighted’) of verse 10. Through this verse in Isaiah, Ps. 40 moves on to its staggering climax in Heb. 10:5–18.

⁸⁸ The verb is $\sqrt{hālā}$ (‘to be sick’), but the root is found in the form *hālā'*, as is frequent in *l-h* verbs (cf. 2 Ch. 16:12). This final aleph can easily drop away as in *heḥeṭī* for *heḥeṭī'* (2 Ki. 13:6; GKC 74k). So here we have *heḥeṭī* for *heḥeṭī'*.

⁸⁹ G. J. Wenham, *Leviticus* (Eerdmans, 1979), pp. 104–112.

occasion is introduced by the conjunction '*im* (*though* in verse 10), which used of time means 'if and when' and covers situations where the event is not in doubt but the timing is indefinite. Secondly, the verb *makes* (*tāšîm*) is either third person singular feminine or second person singular masculine. If the former, then *his life*/'*soul*' (a feminine noun) is the subject: 'whenever his soul makes a guilt offering'. If the latter, then the 'you' (see the NIV mg.) may refer to the Lord as the agent (*cf.* verse 6) in the Servant's death (as the NIV), or it could refer to the individual who appropriates the death of the Servant as the satisfaction needed to make reparation to God. Since the verb ($\sqrt{s̄im}$) is not elsewhere used in connection with sacrifices, it offers no pointers to the solution of these ambiguities. Possibly, Isaiah found the customary verb 'to bring' (hiphil of $\sqrt{bō}$; *cf.* Lv. 5:18) unacceptable as the Lord is not 'bringing' the sacrifice, for it is being made to him. (He is providing but not bringing.) The Servant is not 'bringing' the sacrifice for he *is* the sacrifice. We are not 'bringing' the sacrifice but coming to that which has been provided on our behalf. Was it for this reason that Isaiah found a different word and, being fully aware of the ambiguities inherent in what he was saying, was nevertheless happy to leave it so? This would seem to be the case:

a. The leading idea of verse 10 is what the Lord has done to his Servant (10a). This would readily lead into 'When/though you [O Lord] make ...'. The 'soul' was the essential element in a sacrifice, the life itself laid down in death (Lv. 17:11). Thus the Lord, who alone knows what reparation (Godward and manward) is required, delights in his Servant as the one who fully meets the need. The verb $\sqrt{s̄im}$ was used in 49:2 of the Lord preparing his Servant for his work; now it is used of the completion of the work. (*Cf.* Nu. 21:9, where the same verb is used of Moses 'putting' the serpent on the pole.)

b. To translate 'you' referring to the individual sinner needing the reparation-sacrifice would make this saying the only second person singular verb in the whole poem. This is no argument against it; it could well be designedly so. To say that when individuals appropriate to themselves the benefits of the Servant's death, he sees his *offspring*/'*seed*' is true to Scripture and experience. If this is the correct interpretation, it stresses the continuing availability to the individual of the sacrifice once made and the gathering of the Servant's family to him one by one in personal dependence.

c. The translation 'When his soul makes ...' emphasizes the Servant's willing commitment of his very self to the task of reparation. It could well be that Isaiah wanted to

strike this note right through verses 10–12, following the stress on it in verses 7–9. The Lord's pleasurable commitment to his will (10a) is thus matched by the Servant's 'whole-hearted' involvement in what the Lord required of him. In 50:7 he 'set his face' ($\sqrt{s̄im}$) to the grim task of obedience; here he 'sets his soul' to the completion of the task. This interpretation makes the maximum link with Leviticus 5:17 where the 'person' ('soul') brings the offering, but in fact each interpretation in turn has a real colour of suitability, and since Isaiah left it like that, so must we.

Those who become the Servant's beneficiaries through the reparation-offering become his children (*his offspring/seed*). In 49:21 Zion asked 'Who bore me these?' Here is the answer (cf. 54:1–3, 13ff.). No matter which interpretation of verse 10b is correct, this blessed outcome remains the same: we stray as sheep (6), we return as children. The 'and' before *prolong his days* should be omitted. This or like expressions occur twenty-one times in the Old Testament (e.g. Dt. 5:30 <33>; cf. the similar phrase 'length of days' which occurs nine times, e.g. Dt. 30:20). It is always used (with the possible exception of Ps. 23:6) with reference to the prolongation of earthly life. Its use here, referring to one who died, is unparalleled. Blocher wonders why Isaiah does not use a vocabulary of 'rising from the dead'. He discounts the possibility that Isaiah did not wish to appear reminiscent of the 'dying' and 'rising' of the god Tammuz (for Isaiah was too majestically confident of his prophetic status to be swayed by such a consideration) and urges that the prophet's interest lies in the *contrast of the two states*—shameful death and victorious splendour' not in the passage from the one to the other.⁹⁰ The contrast begins here in the recognition that a life terminated on earth continues in reality and effectiveness. This is no half-life in Sheol but magisterial executive authority as *the will/pleasure of the LORD will prosper/flower in his hand*, i.e. by his personal agency. The *will/pleasure* of the Lord (10ad) is his determination/delight that his Servant should fulfil the role of guilt offering. The guilt offering has been made; what remains now is the gathering of the family (all those for whom the reparation was made) and the Servant lives on, vested with authority to see that this is done. The Old Testament testifies uniformly that the dead are alive, and in this sense it is no surprise to find the Servant alive after death. But things are said about him after death that set him apart from all others. Jacob, for example, 'sees his children' (29:23) like the Servant 'sees his

⁹⁰ Blocher, *Songs of the Servant*, pp. 65–66.

seed' (10c), but Jacob does so as a mere watcher from the sidelines of history. Not so the Servant! He who was crushed under the will of the Lord lives as the executor of that will. In 14:9–17 Isaiah depicted earth's royalty in Sheol, clutching their now meaningless dignities, actually weak, as are the rest, and with their pretensions in life exposed as pitiable foibles. Death has dethroned them. In the case of the Servant, however, death ushers him into sovereign dignity and power, with his own hand administering the saving purposes of the Lord, and as victor taking the spoil (verse 12, see below). 'There is no doubt,' says Westermann, 'that God's act in restoring the Servant, the Latter's exaltation, is an act done upon him after death and on the far side of the grave.'⁹¹

The Servant's death as personal suffering (53:11–12b)

The stress on the fact and meaning of the Servant's death remains (11d), but the spotlight falls more on the Servant himself, his suffering (11a), his resultant satisfaction (11b), his knowledge and righteousness before God (11c) and the divinely given reward consequent upon his sin-bearing death (11d, 12ab).

11 The preposition *After* (*min*) can be translated temporarily (cf. Ps. 73:20) but 'Because of' (see verse 5) is more suitable in this total context, where the Servant's death is never a bare event but always a purposeful act. *Suffering* ('āmāl) is the 'toilsome' work of human beings on earth (Ec. 1:3; 2:10). It does not mean 'pain' pure and simple but the rigour and discipline of doing something painstakingly (10:1; 59:4). The MT has (lit.) 'He will see, he will be satisfied', which, according to the idiom of two unconnected verbs, means 'he shall be satisfied seemingly' or 'satisfied with what he sees'. The outcome of his death—the Lord's delight (10a), the family thus generated (10c), the authority accorded to him (10d)—as it becomes a matter of personal experience ('to see' means 'to experience'; cf. Ps. 16:10), brings him fulfilment.⁹² Two other characteristics the Servant has

⁹¹ Westermann, p. 267.

⁹² The LXX includes the thought that the Lord will show the Servant 'light', and many have found it helpful to insert this into the MT: 'after arising from the travail of his soul he will see light, will be satisfied'. The fact that Q^a reads 'see light' has tended to be accepted as confirmation that this must be the correct Hebrew text, hence the NIV. The introduction is harmless but adds nothing that is not implied in the MT as it stands. 'See light' occurs in Jb. 33:28; 37:21; Ps. 36:9<10>; Is. 9:2<1>. Another suggested change to the Hebrew text is to alter √*rā'*â ('to see') to √*rāwâ* ('to saturate'),

are now mentioned: *knowledge* and righteousness. If he had not known exactly what was needed and known how to do it, nothing would have been achieved. If he had not been utterly *righteous* before the Lord he could not have been the substitute for others; the lamb has to be perfect ([Ex. 12:5](#)). The present poem began by noting that the Servant acted with the wisdom which knows how to achieve the desired result ('act wisely', [52:13](#)). The word here (*b^eda'tō*) could be translated 'by knowing him', indicating that it is as people come to know him that they enter into the benefits he has won for them. But it is more suited to this section of the stanza to retain the focus on the Servant himself and to see here the *knowledge* which he alone possesses (and we need) regarding what God requires in relation to sin and what to do about it.⁹³ *My righteous servant* is more exactly 'the righteous one, my servant' (cf. the RSV). Grammatically, *righteous* is an appositional adjective (cf. [10:30](#); [23:12](#); [28:21](#); [Ps. 93:4](#)). The emphasis thus laid on the Servant's righteousness is deliberate. First, it prepares for the reference to his work of sin-bearing in verse [11d](#) by underlining his moral fitness for the task. Secondly, and immediately, we learn that this righteousness is something he extends to others: he *will justify many*/'will provide righteousness for the many'. The construction is unique in the Old Testament. The hiphil (causative) of $\sqrt{sādēq}$ ('to be righteous') is 'to cause to be righteous' and is usually followed by a direct object ([Dt. 25:1](#); [2 Sa. 15:4](#)). Only here is it followed by an indirect object governed by the preposition *l^e*, hence 'bring righteousness to', 'provide righteousness for'.⁹⁴ The key concept of 'the many' should be noted. It is a precise company, numerous but not all-inclusive. These are the specific objects of the Servant's saving activity. In a context where the Servant's personal righteousness receives such emphasis, the phrase 'to provide righteousness for the many' can mean only that there are those ('the many') whom he clothes in his righteousness, sharing with them his own perfect acceptability before God. In [51:1](#) the remnant were character-

thus Clines (*I, He, We and They*) has 'after he has drunk deep of affliction' and G. R. Driver ('Linguistic ... problems') 'he will be bathed in light'. The text as it stands, however, is idiomatic, stylish and more emotive than the suggested alternatives.

⁹³ D. W. Thomas (*Words and Meanings* [CUP, 1968], p. 13) urges that here $\sqrt{yāda}$ is the verb 'to be humbled'. This would give us 'in/by his humiliation', which is an acceptable thought.

⁹⁴ For this use of *l^e* as expressing the direction of the verbal action or the recipient of it see [6:10](#) ('there is healing for ...'); [14:3](#) ('brings rest to ...'); [Gn. 45:7](#) ('minister life to ...').

ized as ‘seeking after righteousness’; the Servant is the end of their quest. 51:5 announced that ‘my righteousness is near’ and here are the hidden depths of that promise. Who could have known without revelation that the Lord would make available a righteousness of God, a righteousness on which he has already set the seal of his approval by saying ‘that righteous one, my Servant’? The conjunction *And* in *And he will bear* should be understood as explicative, ‘for’ or ‘you see’, i.e. the provision of righteousness arises from the bearing of sin. This is not a new idea. The purpose of the burnt offering ([Lv. 1:3](#)), for example, was that the offerer ‘might be accepted’ (cf. [Lv. 19:5](#); [22:19–21, 29; 23:11](#)). In other words, the more negative aspect of the sacrifices, the bearing and removal of sin, was accompanied by a positive aspect, the according of an accepted status before God. This too is brought to perfection in the Servant: perfect substitution, perfect sin-bearing, brings a perfect righteousness before God. *He* is an emphatic pronoun, ‘it is he who’/‘he himself’. *Bear* is ‘shoulder’ (see verse [4b](#)). On *iniquities* see verse [5b](#).

[Isaiah 53:11](#) is one of the fullest statements of atonement theology ever penned. (i) The Servant knows the needs to be met and what must be done. (ii) As ‘that righteous one, my servant’ he is both fully acceptable to the God our sins have offended and has been appointed by him to his task. (iii) As righteous, he is free from every contagion of our sin. (iv) He identified himself personally with our sin and need. (v) The emphatic pronoun ‘he’ underlines his personal commitment to this role. (vi) He accomplishes the task fully. Negatively, in the bearing of iniquity; positively, in the provision of righteousness.

12ab Surely no-one can work through this great poem and not come to the traditional rendering of this verse with a sense of anticlimax! When all comes to all, is he worth no more than to take his portion along with the great and to share his spoils with the mighty? A different and altogether more suitable rendering is obvious and has been canvassed by a number of commentators (North, Muilenburg, Ridderbos). The preferable translation is, ‘I will allocate to him the many, and the strong he will allocate as spoil’. Or, slightly more freely, ‘I will apportion to him the many, and the strong he will apportion as spoil’. On ‘apportion ... the many’ (^a*ḥallēq barabbîm*) see the identical formation in [Job 39:17](#). In both cases the *beth essentiae* idiom is exemplified: ‘He has not apportioned to her such a thing as wisdom’ (^a*ṣûmmîm*) is permissible, but it is better to

treat '*et*' as marking a direct object, for 'to apportion' usually governs a direct object in the Bible.⁹⁵ Both constructions (*beth essentiae* and the 'accusative' particle) would have exclamatory force, calling attention to this striking thing, that the Servant has received as his own all those ('the many') whom he died to save, and that he really is King of all kings. *Great* (*rabbîm*) basically means 'many' but can mean 'great'; *strong* ('*ašûmmîm*') basically means 'strong' but can mean 'many'. It all depends on context. In the present case, there is no question but that we should translate 'the many ... the strong'. The initial references to 'the many' and 'kings' (52:14–15) were part of the enigma of the opening stanza. They are now explained: 'the many' are the whole company of the redeemed; the 'kings' fall silent because they are in the presence of the stronger than the strong, they are spoil at his disposal. It must be noticed that he is 'allocated' the many but 'the strong' are his own spoil, the fruits of his victory. The Lord gives his Servant all those whom he has redeemed (cf. Jn. 6:37ff.) in token that, in the sight of God, the work of redemption has been successfully completed. Total supremacy is, however, his by right of conquest. He is not 'given' the strong as those captured by some other power and then placed under his charge; he takes them by his own superior power and disposes of them according to his own pleasure.

The Servant's death as voluntary (53:12c–f)

The Song closes with a fourfold statement of the ground on which the Servant has received 'the many' as his portion and why it is that the strong are his spoil. *Because* (*tahat* 'aṣer) is the strongest causative in Hebrew and is the exact equivalent to 'the fact that'. The rewards are no more than is due to the death he died. (i) It was voluntary, *he poured out his life/soul unto death*. In Psalm 141:8, one faced with deadly danger cries out, 'Do not pour out my soul' (NIV, 'give me over to death'). On this Anderson remarks that the LXX's 'take not away my life' is 'a reasonable interpretation'.⁹⁶ The Servant was both the agent and the substance of this outpouring. No-one took his life away from him, he laid it down of his own accord (Jn. 10:18; Phil. 2:7 [RV]). On the significance of voluntariness in atonement see verse 7. (ii) He personally identified himself with those he came to save: *was numbered* is a tolerative niphal, 'let himself be numbered'. He was

⁹⁵ See footnote 3 on page 434.

⁹⁶ A. A. Anderson, *The Psalms*, NCB (Oliphants, 1972).

content to suffer loss, not only of his life ([12c](#)), but also of his good name and to be considered by the onlooker as a rebel (*transgressors*/‘rebels’ is here a participle, ‘those in a state of rebellion’; cf. verse [5a](#)). (iii) He acted as a substitute in lifting up and taking away ($\sqrt{nāśā}$; cf. verse [4a](#)) the actual wrongdoing (a noun from $\sqrt{hāṭā}$; cf. [6:7](#)) of *many*. (iv) He acted as mediator and *made intercession*. For the verb ($\sqrt{pāḡa'}$) see verse [6](#). The base meaning is ‘to cause to reach’ and hence to ‘cause someone’s plea to reach someone’s ears’ (to intercede) or to ‘introduce someone into someone’s presence’ (to mediate). The Servant is thus a go-between, interposing between two parties, not as a barrier but as a bridge. In verse [6](#), the Lord put his Servant in between, using him as a means of disposing of that (our iniquity) which alienated him from us. Here the Servant comes voluntarily to stand with us so that when he had borne our sin he might bring us to God.

b. Good news for the whole world: universal proclamation and invitation, ‘Come, for all things are now ready!’ ([54:1–55:13](#))

The first two Servant Songs are followed by tailpieces concerned with divine confirmation of the Servant’s task and promises of its success ([42:5–9](#); [49:7–13](#)). A. A. Anderson, *The Psalms*, NCB (Oliphants, 1972). The third and fourth Songs are followed by invitations to respond to the Servant and what he has done ([50:10–11](#)). Response is the keynote of chapters [54–55](#). Many divine acts are spoken of but the only human acts envisaged are responses: to sing ([54:1](#)), to enlarge the tent ([54:2](#)), to come to the banquet ([55:1](#)), to seek the Lord ([55:6](#)). The general relationship with [52:13–53:12](#) is clear. In his saving work, the Servant has done everything, removing sin, establishing in righteousness, creating a family. The way is therefore open for response, pure and simple: to sing over what someone else has accomplished ([54:1](#)), to enjoy a feast for which someone else has paid ([55:1](#)).

These two chapters also bring to a conclusion the whole panorama which opened at [40:1](#), as the outline on p. [289](#) shows. The developing vision exposed both the need of the Gentile world alongside that of Zion and the vocation of the Servant of the Lord to perform the double task of bringing divine truth to the Gentiles and restoring the survivors of Israel. Now that the Servant has performed his mighty work, we find in chapter [54](#) the comforting of Zion and in chapter [55](#) the universal call of the gospel to all the thirsty and all the wicked. The distinction, however, between the two chapters must not be overpressed. Zion is not actually named in chapter [54](#) even though the imagery of

the gathering family (1–3; cf. 49:18ff.) and the restored city (11–12; cf. 49:16–17) is Zion-centred. But the motifs of chapter 54 represent the promises which, in fact, the gospel makes to all. In other words, the form of the two chapters is dictated by Isaiah's intention to show how the earlier promises and forecasts are fulfilled in the Servant, but the content of the chapters declares the blessings pledged to all for whom the Servant died. It is therefore correct to say, with Richard Dowsett,⁹⁷ that chapter 54 speaks of the enlarging of the tents and chapter 55 tells who is going to be there.⁹⁸

Invitation to sing: security, peace and righteousness (54:1–17)

Three motifs divide this poem: family (1–5), marriage (6–10) and city (11–17). Speculations about the prehistory of these pieces fail for lack of information, and suggestions that we have here vestiges of a 'promise of salvation' responding to a now lost 'community lament' do not further our understanding of the material in its present integration. In verse 5 the 'family' section concludes with a reference to an almighty Husband and this forms a bridge into verses 6–10 with their marriage-renewal theme. The concluding note of peace (10) prepares for the final section in which the storm-tossed city comes to security in righteousness.

⁹⁷ In an unpublished lecture at Christ Church, Westbourne, England, 1988.

⁹⁸ The literary form of the chapters confirms their topical unity. Words are used throughout in doublets and triplets (although this is not always evident in the NIV). For example, 'sing ... song', 'child ... children' (54:1); 'swore ... sworn' (54:9); 'shaken ... removed ... shaken ... removed' (54:10); 'sons ... children'/'sons' (54:13); 'attack ... attacks' (54:15); 'I ... created ... I ... created' (54:16); 'Come ... come ... come, buy ... come, buy' (55:1). 'Money' appears three times in 55:1–2, and the verb 'to hear' three times in 55:2c–3b. 'Peoples', 'nations' and the verb 'to know' all appear twice in 54:4–5; in 55:7–9 'way' and 'thought' each occur four times; and 'instead of' and 'grow' each occur twice in 55:13. 'Mountains' and 'hills' are mentioned in 54:10 and 55:12. The 'compassion' group of words occurs in 54:7–8, 10 and 55:7. 'See'/'behold' is repeated in 54:15–16 and 55:4–5. √ *nātā* is translated 'stretch' in 54:2 and 'give' in 55:3. 'Peace' in 54:10 and 55:12 looks back to 53:5 and 48:22. 'Covenant' in 54:10 and 55:3 recalls 42:6 and 49:8 (the tailpieces of the first and second Songs). There is a verbal inclusio in 'burst into song' (54:1; 55:12), and an equally significant inclusio in the picture of the barren woman who becomes a joyful mother (54:1) and the corrupted world of thorn and brier transformed into the Lord's garden (55:12–13).

The miracle family (54:1–5)

Two keywords from 52:13–53:12 appear here: ‘the many’ (52:14–15; 53:11–12) are now the ‘many’ (*more*) sons of the barren (1); and the ‘seed’ (53:10, ‘offspring’) of the Servant are now the ‘seed’ (3, *descendants*) of Zion. In other words, we see the results of the Servant’s work taking shape before our eyes.

- A The first command. Joy over a supernaturally gathered community: barren singer (1a–d); abundant sons (1ef)
- B The second command. Expansion in expectation of growth: preparation (2) for extension (3a) and possession (3bc)
- C The third command. Confidence for the future: absence of all nervousness (4ab) because the past is over (4cd) and the future secured by an almighty Husband, Creator and Redeemer (5)

Each set of commands rests on explanations (*because* in verse 2 and *for* in verses 3, 4c and 5; the ‘*for*’ in verse 4c has been omitted by the NIV). The picture is that of the normative state of the community of the redeemed, the people of God, the church. They have been brought into being by supernatural birth (1), designed for growth (2–3) and are secure in the loving care of the Lord (4–5).

1 Song symbolizes entering into a blessing provided by another’s efforts (*cf.* 30:29). So here, the *barren woman* sings, not because she has ceased to be barren but because the Lord has acted in his Servant with the effect that his ‘seed’ (53:11) become her *children*/‘sons’. The picture of Sarah, the barren woman who was to bear the miracle child and become the mother of a family more numerous than the stars, provides background (Gn. 11:30; 16:1; Is. 51:2). The contrast between the *desolate woman* and *her who has a husband* is not between Zion in exile and pre-exilic Zion ‘married’ to the Lord. Isaiah left that sort of history-orientated thought behind at 48:20–22, from which point that particular tract of history provides motifs but the fulfilment lies elsewhere. The contrast here is between one who has no chance of having children (being deprived of a husband’s care and support; on *desolate* [šômēmâ] *cf.* 2 Sa. 13:20) and one naturally placed to be fruitful (who *has a husband*). Thus, the gathering family cannot be explained naturally as a fact (she is *barren*, she *never bore* a child, was *never in labour* and is *desolate*) and is more than can be explained naturally in extent (her children are *more than of her who has a husband*). The church, the Lord’s people, are created by supernatu-

ral birth.

2–3 Tent life is a picture of the ideal (*cf. Je. 2:2–3*) when the people walked with God (*cf. 16:5*, where Isaiah envisages the Messiah reigning ‘in the tent of David’ and *33:20* where Jerusalem is described as a ‘tent that will not be moved’; the comparable reference in *Am. 9:11* suggests that the tent may also be a Davidic motif). The wilderness days (for all that the people failed at every hand’s turn) were ideally days of separation unto the Lord, exclusive fellowship, walking under his care and in dependence on him. *Stretch/let them/they must stretch* shows Zion’s sons active in preparation for growth. *Your tent curtains/‘the curtains of your habitations’* is a plural of amplitude suggesting roominess. With *lengthen* and *strengthen* equal attention is given to enlargement and solidity. All this work in readiness for increase can be undertaken confidently *For you will spread*, *i.e.* it rests on a divine promise. *Spread* ($\sqrt{pāraṣ}$; *cf. Gn. 28:14*, which Isaiah may have had in mind) recalls the best of the patriarchal past. In Egypt Israel experienced growth against the natural odds which required supernatural explanation (*Ex. 1:12*). *Your descendants will dispossess nations* is ‘Your seed will possess even nations’ (on *descendants/seed* see *53:10*). The words ‘your seed will possess’ occur in *Genesis 22:17* (*cf. Gn 24:60*), but only in *Exodus 34:24*; *Deuteronomy 9:1; 11:23* and *Joshua 23:9* is there reference to ‘possessing the nations’. In *Psalm 2:8* the Davidic king is promised the nations as his inheritance, and this Messianic-Davidic background is present in the link between *desolate cities* here, the desolate land into which the ‘holy seed’ is born (*6:13; 7:14ff.*) and the desolation (*24:1–20*; *cf. verse 12*) awaiting the world city before the Lord reigns gloriously in Zion (*24:23*). Thus, in a very few words Isaiah brings together the great promises (Abraham) and moments (Canaan) of the past and the brightest hopes for the future.

4 In verse 4 the ‘For’ before *you will not suffer, you will not be humiliated and you will forget* should be reintroduced. The commands in this final section are abundantly furnished with explanatory assurances, and it is a serious error on the part of the NIV to obscure this fact. *Shame* ($\sqrt{bōṣ}$), *disgrace* ($\sqrt{kālām}$) and *humiliated* ($\sqrt{ḥāpār}$) are synonymous and are heaped up to rule out every possibility of disappointment or shamefacedness in the future. Total confidence may be enjoyed because the past (from *youth* to *widowhood*, *i.e.* the whole past) is finished and gone (*4cd*). Maybe these two time-points are mentioned because in the common experience they would cover the whole of adult

life. There may, of course, be a reference to Egyptian slavery (the youth period; cf. Je. 2:2f.) and Babylonian ‘widowhood’. The essential point, however, is that from the early spring of youth right through to the sadnesses life holds in store all is subsumed under the category of things past and forgotten, out of sight and out of mind, the slate and the memory both wiped clean.

5 The explanation of it all is found in the Lord: he is the great inclusio from verse 1g to verse 5, his promise and his person alike are the guarantee of the existence (1), the growth (2–3) and the security (4) of his people. On *Maker* see 43:7; Deuteronomy 32:15; Psalm 100:3. This is the God of redeeming, transforming work, ‘making’ those who were not his people to become his people. *Husband* denotes a deliberately formed relationship, designed for perpetuity (50:1ff.).⁹⁹ *LORD* (Yahweh) is the exodus revelation of the God who saves his people and overthrows his and their enemies. On *Almighty*/‘of hosts’ see 1:9. *His name* is what he has revealed himself to be, what he is eternally (Ex. 3:15). On *the Holy One of Israel* see 1:4 (cf. 6:3). On *Redeemer* (*go'ēl*) see 35:9–10; 49:7. Within the divine nature there is no tension between the utter holiness that constitutes his being and his committed nearness to his people. It is in his holiness that he affirms his next-of-kinship. The redemption now accomplished through the Servant is a holy redemption, satisfying at once the requirements of the divine nature and the needs of human nature. In the a-b-a-b pattern of these titles, *God of all the earth* parallels and amplifies *the LORD Almighty*. In other words, he is almighty in relation to the realities of life on earth. It is not a titular almighty or only a heavenly power but an actual sovereignty over the earth. Hence the fearlessness (4a) with which his people can face the future. The Lord has committed himself to us as *husband* in all his fulness of power, he is on our side as *Redeemer* in all the fulness of the divine nature (he is the *Holy One*). Every circumstance that befalls us is within the divine sovereignty of the *God of all the earth*.

The reconstituted marriage: the eternal covenant of peace and love (54:6–10)

⁹⁹ The words *bō'a layik* is more difficult. The general rule is that ‘husband’ takes the singular form, the plural being reserved for ownership of things and animals. While the meaning here cannot be in doubt, the plural may be a plural of majesty (since the reference is to the Lord) or may have been used to create an assonance.

Like verses 1–5, this second stanza is linked with its foregoing context. 50:1–3 pictured a broken marriage relationship in which the alienated husband came and ‘called’ (50:2) his erring wife to be restored. Since she would not respond, it became part of the work of the Servant to ‘bring back’ Jacob (49:5–6). The Servant has now finished his work and restoration has been accomplished. This new situation is summed up as a *covenant of peace* (10), which refers back to the making of peace by the punishment which fell on the Servant (53:5).¹⁰⁰ The fruits of that vicarious punishment have been conserved as the eternal and pledged possession of the Lord’s people.

A¹The broken marriage restored (6)

B Three reassurances (7–9)

b¹ Compassion conquering abandonment (7)

b² Love overcoming wrath (8)

b³ Divine oath terminating wrath (9)

A²The eternal covenant of love and peace (10)

6 The initial ‘For’ (omitted by the NIV) links verses 6–10 with verses 1–5, explaining the reference to the Lord as *husband* (5). *Will call* treats the Hebrew verb as a perfect of certainty. In the light, however, of the background in 50:1–3 and the link with the finished work of the Servant (chapter 53), it is better to understand a past perfect, ‘has called’ (RV), *i.e.* by the saving acts of the Servant the former separation has been healed. *As if you were* is ‘as in the case of’. *Deserted and distressed* attempts to reproduce the assonance of the Hebrew (*‘azûbâ wa‘şûbat rûah*) but does so at the expense of putting the blame on the husband for ‘desertion’. The verb in question simply means ‘left’ and allows whatever marital scenario the context requires. The background in 50:1–3 points to a wife justly left but consequently sad at heart. *Who married young only to be rejected* is

¹⁰⁰ Commentators urge that it cannot be proved that *peace* here has any connection with ‘peace’ in 53:5. What would constitute proof? For that matter, neither can it be disproved! But the facts must be allowed to register their own impression. Every other Servant Song leads into a significant tailpiece, and it is to be expected that the fourth Song will do the same. This is not to say that 52:13–53:12 and 54:1ff. always belonged together or to deny them an independent prehistory now irrecoverable. It simply notes their juxtaposition and the role that chapter 54 now plays in relation to 53.

a remarkably free translation which again makes the husband blameworthy. The verb now is an imperfect (*kî t̄immā'ēs*). The obvious rendering, ‘because she shall be spurned’, is unsuitable, and it may be that the words are an indignant expostulation ‘that she/such should be spurned!’. ‘A wife of youth’ suggests all the passionate devotion of a young married couple with the bright hopes of their early married life—can all this ultimately mean nothing? [Jeremiah 2:1ff.](#) again provides background, as does [Hosea 3:1](#) where the prophet is commanded to ‘renew your love for [your] wife ... like the Lord’s love ...’. The Lord’s early love is the model of his undying love, a passionate devotion to his people which cannot ever come to count for nothing. *Says your God* is a final touch of assurance. The call, the implication of an unchanged love, etc., are a word of revelation from *your God*, ‘the God who has made himself yours’.

7–9 These verses contain three distinct words of assurance (see the outline above). The first two ([7–8](#)) are linked by the word *moment* (*reḡa'*) and the second and third ([8–9](#)) by *anger* (*qeṣep*) and *angry* ($\sqrt{qāṣap}$). These links encapsulate the message that there was anger, real and justified, but it was transient. Other realities, compassion and love, have taken over permanently. As Westermann says,

Equally there is a resonance of [53:5](#), that the punishment the Servant bore really has brought peace with God. The emphasis in verse [7](#) is on the greatness of the compassion which was exercised; in verse [8](#) on the endlessness of the love which has replaced wrath; and in verse [9](#) on the permanence of the resulting situation.

Here we have the heart of the matter with God himself and in God himself the change has already taken place A change has come over God. He ceases from wrath and again shows mercy. There is a clear re-echoing of the words of the prologue [[40:1–3](#)].¹⁰¹

7 Here we see the brevity of the alienation contrasted with the greatness of the reconciliation. *Abandoned* is the same word translated *deserted* in verse [6](#). Graciously the sins for which the ‘wife’ was ‘left’ are not mentioned. The assurance offered here is not that sins really have been forgiven but that God really has been reconciled. He who was offended has gathered his beloved back to him. The ground of the regathering also is found in him. It is *deep/great compassion*, love which overflows, love in its passionate

¹⁰¹ Westermann, p. 274.

reality (*cf.* 1 Ki. 3:26)—‘because I am still in love with you I will gather you’.

8 Brief anger is contrasted with endless love. The ‘leaving’ of verse 7 is explained and described. *Surge of anger* translates šeṣēp qeṣep̄. *qeṣep̄* means ‘[a burst of] anger’, but the assonantal first word (šeṣēp̄) is otherwise unknown.¹⁰² *Kindness (hesed)* is the unfailing love that is ever loyal to its pledge, love as a settled disposition, the unchanging heart of the fire of love as *compassion* (see verse 7) is its flame. The *Redeemer* (gō’ēl; see verse 5) is here specifically the God who has undertaken his people’s needs in relation to his own wrath and alienation, motivated by his love.

9 While the reference to the flood underlines the seriousness and universality of the divine wrath of verse 8, the main thrust of the illustration is on the permanence of the settlement that has been effected. *To me this is like the days of Noah* is ‘For the waters of Noah is this to me’. The alteration from ‘waters’ to *days* is minimal but must be resisted.¹⁰³ The reiteration ‘waters … waters’ calls forcible attention not to a time but to an act of judgment. The settlement after the flood was made in the light of a judgment which the Lord adjudged to be satisfactory to his requirements. His declaration of peace, the hanging up of his war bow as no longer needed (Gn. 9:13), was not an act of leniency but a consequence of justice satisfied. So in the present case, the equivalent of ‘the waters of Noah’ has passed. Judgment has fallen, the punishment that brought peace to us (53:5). *Angry* signifies the emotion of anger, *rebuke* is its expression. Thus the anger of God is totally allayed.

10 Though the word *covenant* is not used in connection with the broken marriage of verse 6,¹⁰⁴ the idea of a *covenant of peace* forms a perfect inclusio to the stanza. The verse opens with ‘For’, offering a final explanation of the permanency which verse 9 stressed.

¹⁰² A similar word šeṭep̄ (‘flood/inundation’) is a favourite with Isaiah (8:8; 28:2, 15, 17–18; 30:28; 43:2; 66:12). Perhaps we have here a colloquialism in which one word attracted the other into a rhyming sound.

¹⁰³ The change from ‘For the waters of Noah …’ (kî mē nōah; RV) to *like the days of Noah* … (kēmē nōah) is minimal and the meaning is essentially unaltered, but a reference to the actual form of the judgment (waters) is more pointed than a broad reference to the period. Besides, there is no call for gratuitous change. And translators should at least recognize an obligation to footnote what they are doing.

¹⁰⁴ Cf. Pr. 2:17; Ezk. 16:59ff.; Mal. 2:14.

Just as the Noatic settlement was formalized into a perpetual covenant, so the work of the Servant leads to a covenant pledging peace in perpetuity. In Noah's flood, the *mountains* disappeared under the waters of judgment ([Gn. 7:19ff.](#)), and this may have originated a stock-in-trade imagery for disasters of cosmic magnitude ([Ps. 46:2–3 <3–4>](#)) and for the eschatological devastation itself ([24:1ff.](#)). On a simpler level, the fabric of the world is the most permanent thing we know and lends itself as an apt comparison (*cf.* [Je. 31:35–37](#)). *Unfailing love* is *hesed* (see verse [8](#)). Throughout its history, the divine *covenant* has always been linked with sacrifice ([Gn. 8:20ff.; 9:8ff.; 15:9–18](#); [Ex. 24:4–8](#); [Ps. 50:5](#)). The link here between *covenant* and *peace* implies a peace resting on sacrifice—the death of the Servant. Like each of the preceding sections ([6d](#), [8e](#)), this third section is confirmed by a divine word. The concluding note of *compassion* (see verse [7](#)) is reassuring. The Lord's hand has not been forced, even by what his Servant has done. His own heart of love has been engaged in the enterprise of stilling wrath, effecting reconciliation and sealing peace. What delighted the Lord in prospect and in operation ([53:10](#)) reflected his heart in its surging, passionate love for his people.

The city of righteousness ([54:11–17](#))

The city theme is integral to the Isaianic literature: the Davidic city ([1:26f.](#)); the ideal world centre ([2:2–4](#)); the city cleansed ([4:2–6](#)) and joyous ([12:1–6](#)); the destroyed city ([24:10](#)); the universal ([25:1–9](#)), strong ([26:1ff.](#)) and redeemed ([35:10](#)) city; the fallen city ([47:1](#)) and the raised city ([52:1](#)); the comforted city ([66:10ff.](#)). Isaiah's book rests on the contrast between the city humankind builds without God, which ends in destruction, and the city of God in all its eternal glory. This present 'city' passage, the third stanza of the poem, is linked with the first stanza by the theme of Zion's sons ([1](#), [13](#)) and with the second stanza by the note of *peace* ([10](#), [13](#)). In this way it is a summary and conclusion to the whole. It is linked with the foregoing Servant Song by the concept of righteousness ([53:11](#); [54:14](#), [17](#)). In verse [10](#) peace was pledged by covenant; in verse [14](#) it is enjoyed by the city's people; in [53:11](#) righteousness is secured for, and gifted to, those for whom the Servant died; in verse [14](#) it is the ground on which they rest, and in verse [17](#) the personal possession they enjoy. The section itself is a development of the programme set out in verse [11a](#). The afflicted/'humbled' one becomes beautified ([11b–12](#)); the one *lashed by storms*/'buffeted' (*i.e.* by life's circumstances and hostilities) becomes secure on the foundation of *righteousness* ([13–17ab](#)); and the one *not comforted* (*i.e.* by the Lord) stands

before him, a servant robed in righteousness ([17cd](#)). This unity of development is presented in an a-b-a-b pattern. The words ‘Behold I’ (*hinnēh ’ānōkî*; [11b](#), [16a](#)) link the two ‘a’ sections and *righteousness/vindication* ([14a](#), [17d](#)) link the ‘b’ sections.

A¹ The beautified city ([11–12](#))

B¹ Its foundation of righteousness ([13–14](#))

A² The secure city ([15–17b](#))

B² Its status of righteousness ([17cd](#))

11–12 On *afflicted* (*city* is a translator’s interpretative addition), *lashed by storms* and *not comforted* (the *and* should be omitted), see the introductory note above.¹⁰⁵ By words and pictures, Isaiah creates an impression of dazzling splendour, reaching from the unseen *foundations* upwards to *walls, gates* and *battlements*. The initial ‘See’/‘Behold’ before *I will build* should be restored. *I will build you with stones* is ‘I will lay your stones in mascara’. Job’s strikingly dark-eyed daughter was called Keren-Happuch (‘a horn of mascara’; *Jb. 42:14*; cf. *Je. 4:30*). *1 Chronicles 29:2* mentions ‘stones of mascara’, i.e. stones set in a coloured mortar designed to highlight the beauty of the construction. *I will build ... your foundations with sapphires/and I will found you in sapphires* refers to a vivid blue stone, though maybe not today’s ‘sapphires’. *Battlements* is ‘suns’, i.e. towers catching and reflecting the sun’s light, or possibly (cf. *Song 4:4*) polished circular shields hung on the walls for decoration and to advertise the city’s inner strength. *Rubies* (*kadkōd*) are sparkling red stones. *Sparkling jewels* is (lit.) ‘stones of ’eqdā’ (from √ *qādāh* meaning ‘to kindle’; [50:11](#); [64:1–2a](#)), i.e. stones of a fiery red colour.

13–14 Internally, these verses possess an a-b-a-b pattern. [13a](#) and [14a](#) focus on a relationship with the Lord in the light of his truth and on the ground of his righteousness. [13b](#) and [14b–e](#) share the thought of peace as peace with God and the peace from earthly danger. *Taught by the LORD* brings to the fore one of the core themes of this section: that the citizens of the city are like the Servant of the Lord. *Taught (limmūdīm)* is as in [50:4](#), where the tongue and ear of the Servant are characteristic of ‘those who are taught’/‘disciples’. (Cf. the matching section of this stanza, verse [17cd](#), where the city’s people are actually *servants*, sharing also the Servant’s title.) Isaiah does not say how

¹⁰⁵ The assonance of the three words in verse [11a](#) (‘*niyyâ sōrâ lô’ nuhāmâ*’) is notably similar to that in [1:21](#), which was also addressed to the city.

this promise is to be fulfilled (*cf.* Je. 31:34a–d). The people of the Lord have always been set apart by the one great fact that they possess the word of the Lord. When the Servant has completed his work, this too will reach completion and all those whom he has redeemed will stand in the Lord’s presence to be taught his word of truth. They will live in the enjoyment of what he has accomplished, for he accomplished *peace* (lit. ‘abundant peace’; *cf.* 53:5); the Lord covenants it (54:10) and they enjoy it to the full. It is destructive of any possibility of Bible study when translators gratuitously alter keywords. Verse 13, which opens and ends with ‘your sons’, is a lovely Isaianic palindrome, rounding out the truth and emphasizing its central reality. This is what the Servant has done; he has created a family (*cf.* 53:10). Those for whom he died are his sons,¹⁰⁶ brought here into the ‘abundant’ enjoyment of the fruits of his death. *Righteousness* is the rock foundation on which the city is built (*cf.* the ‘rock’ imagery of 28:16 and the reference to ‘righteousness’ in 28:17). There, the absence of a righteousness acceptable to the Lord exposed the city to the danger of being swept away; here, undergirding the foundations, is a righteousness of God, according to 53:11 the righteousness of the Servant. Hence, the city is secure from disorder. *Tyranny will be far from you* is ‘Be distant from oppression’. The imperative is used to express an absolutely certain outcome, something so sure to happen that it can be commanded (*cf.* 2:9). *Tyranny* (‘ōšeq) is a general word (found fifteen times in the Old Testament; in Isaiah at 30:12; 59:13) for the internal disruption of society. By contrast, *terror* (m^eḥittâ) represents assault from outside (Ps. 89:40 <41>) as well as inside alarm (Pr. 10:14). The former suits the context here: the city enjoys total peace. Fear as an emotion (‘for you will not be afraid’) and as an experience (‘for it will not come near you’) is ruled out.

15–17b Secure on its foundation of righteousness (14), the city is doubly secure in the creatorial sovereignty of the Lord: (i) No assault (were such possible!) would have divine authorization and therefore must fail (15a). (ii) The people of the Lord will always be strong enough to overcome (15b). (iii) The Lord, whose absolute sovereignty covers the manufacturer (16a–b), the product (16c) and the intent of the user (16d), pledges that

¹⁰⁶ There are those wishing to emend ‘sons’ to ‘builders’ (*bānayîk*), helped thereto by Q^a, which reads ‘builders’ where the MT has ‘sons’ at the end of the verse. The thought that the builders of such a city would need more than human wisdom is not inappropriate, but Muilenburg is right to note that ‘the style of the prophet favours the M.T.’.

neither weapon ([17a](#)) nor accusation ([17b](#)) can succeed against his people. *If* is a possible translation of *hēn*,^{[107](#)} but the more usual meaning, ‘See’/‘Behold’, is vivid: (lit.) ‘Look, attack someone surely will—not at my prompting/it will not be *my doing*.’^{[108](#)}

16 This verse is enfolded by the verb ‘to create’ and is one of the great biblical statements of the sovereignty which this verb attributes to the Creator (*cf.* [4:5](#); see on ‘made’ in [37:16](#)). On sovereignty working in history see [10:5–15](#). Here, human skill (*blacksmith*), mechanical device (*weapon*), evil purpose (*destroyer*) and outcome (*prevail*) are all within the sovereign disposal of the Creator.

17ab *Refute every tongue* is ‘You will prove every tongue guilty that rises with you in judgment’, *i.e.* the Lord’s people will be secure from every accusation at law. To ‘rise in judgment’ means to take someone to court, to stand as an accuser. In other words, Isaiah returns here to the thought of the uncontested justice of what the Lord has done for his people (see [45:21](#); [49:24](#)). Neither frontal assault nor legal challenge to their right can deprive them of what the Lord has granted.

17cd Just as the movement from A¹ to B¹ (see the outline above) was from city to citizens, with their relationship to the Lord as sons, pupils and those at peace with him, so here the secure city ([15–17ab](#)) is followed by the status of its citizens before the Lord ([17cd](#)). In Hebrew *heritage* does not describe the way in which property was acquired (by inheritance under a will) but the reality of possession. All the blessings the poem has described (the city and its strength and the uncontested right to citizenship) now belong to the *servants of the LORD*. Up to this point Isaiah has used ‘servant’ only in the singular but from now on it is used only in the plural. The saving work of the Servant creates *servants*. Whatever their blessings, their chief dignity is to share his title. *Vindication* is an absurd mistranslation of ‘righteousness’. According to [53:11](#), the Servant ‘provides righteousness’ for those for whom he died. Now the Lord himself validates this gift by affirmation (lit.) ‘and their righteousness is from me’ (*i.e.* ‘from with me’ or ‘straight out from my presence’). Their status before God could not be more honourable (*servants*), nor could their acceptance before him (‘righteousness’) be more complete. On *declares*/‘It is the LORD’s affirmation’ see [1:24](#).

¹⁰⁷ E.g. [Lv. 25:20](#). See [GKC 159w](#) and Dhorme on [Jb. 4:18](#).

¹⁰⁸ The form *mē'ōtī* is the same as *mē'ittī*, and the meaning ‘on my authority’ is well exemplified in [1 Ki. 1:27](#).

Invitation to come: the world renewed and a universal call to free, full and covenanted pardon (55:1–13)

Smart tellingly compares chapter 54 with the book of Revelation ‘with its vision of the New Jerusalem and the disciples of God with which it is peopled’ and chapter 55 with the Gospel of John ‘in its passionate appeal to men to open their eyes to the richness of the gifts that God is offering so freely and to grasp them in faith and repentance while there is yet time’.¹⁰⁹ The chapter itself, with its riot of rich imagery, is a well-constructed unity.

A¹ The first picture: individual renewal, needs met (1)

B¹ Hearing the word of the Lord (2–3b)

C¹ The certainty of the promises (3c–5)

D The content of the word: a call to repent (6–7)

C² The seriousness of the call (8–9)

B² The efficaciousness of the word of the Lord (10–11)

A² The second picture: world renewal, the curse lifted (12–13)

The central preoccupation is with the word of the Lord (B¹-B²), but A¹-B¹ reveals that the imagery of the feast is to be understood as hearing the word, and B²-A² depicts the outrunning word as the agent in re-creation. It is a safe thing to trust this word (C¹) and also essential because left to ourselves we are astray from the Lord’s thoughts and ways (C²). Therefore, the heart of the matter (D) must be a personal seeking of the Lord. For purposes of closer enquiry we may note that the poem also falls into two main sections (1–5, 6–13), each of which opens with an invitation (1, 6–7), proceeds to the thought of the word of the Lord as the key factor (2–3, 8–11), promises a new world (3c–5b, 12–13b) and concludes with a statement about the Lord (5c–e, 13c–e). These matching sections complement each other, providing a fulness of truth.

Individual needs met (55:1–5)

The threefold *come* in verse 1 (the NIV mistranslates the summons word ‘Ho’ as *come* in 1a) is followed by a threefold ‘listen’ (2c, 3ab), and the section concludes with a threefold guarantee—the covenant (3c), the king (3d–5b) and the Lord (5c–e).

1 In the plethora of imperatives¹¹⁰ Westermann hears ‘the cries of street vendors’

¹⁰⁹ Smart, p. 220.

which Isaiah replicates in making ‘his urgent, impassioned appeals’.¹¹¹ Nothing, however, is jumbled. Each *come* highlights a distinct aspect of what is offered. (i) *Come to the waters* highlights the existence of need and the adequacy of the provision of water for the thirsty. (ii) *You who have no money*/‘And the one who has no money’ *come* highlights the poverty of the needy one. This is a purchase which is somehow free to the purchaser. Poverty is no barrier, indeed the person with no money is a welcome customer who will *eat* according to need. (iii) *Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost* highlights the richness (not just *water* but *wine and milk!*) as well as the freeness of the commodity. Yet alongside this emphasis on freeness, the verb *buy* is repeated. The thought of purchase is not set aside; this is no soup-kitchen, even if the clients are beggars. There is a purchase and a price, though not theirs to pay. They bring their poverty to a transaction already completed. Contextually, this is another allusion to the work of the Servant. The feast is one of love and forgiveness ([7](#)). The abundance and freeness of the water of refreshment ([44:3](#)), the wine of joy ([25:6–8](#)) and the milk of richness ([Ex. 3:8](#)) and supremacy ([60:16](#)) is figurative of the Lord’s salvation with the Servant at its centre (see verses [3–5](#)). His the price, ours the freeness! The vocative *all you who are thirsty* is singular; the imperative *come* is plural. The singular individualizes the response; the plural generalizes it, *i.e.* there is enough for all but each must personally respond. ‘Like’, says Smart, ‘the “whosoever” in [John 3:16](#).¹¹² *Buy* ($\sqrt{\text{šābar}}$) means specifically ‘buy bread’, alluding to the other ‘staple’ of life and thereby indicating that everything needed is supplied.

2–3b The figure of commerce is continued ([2ab](#)) with the buyer lacking discernment (see verses [8–9](#)) to make wise purchases. In verse [2cd](#), while the feast motif is continued, the new thought of ‘hearing’ enters, equivalent at first to ‘hear the invitation to the feast’. In verse [3ab](#) metaphor is abandoned and the calls focus on a personal relationship

¹¹⁰ Some urge that [55:1](#) is metrically unacceptable and offer a variety of rewritings. The majority follow the lead of Q^a by omitting ‘and eat, come, buy’. But appeals to metre are notoriously subjective and assume a greater knowledge of Hebrew metrical rules than is actually available. In any case, it is very possible that here Q^a’s omission is due to the scribal error of homoioteleuton, whereby the copyist moved from the ‘buy’ of *buy and eat* to the ‘buy’ of *buy wine*.

¹¹¹ Westermann, p. 282.

¹¹² Smart, p. 222.

to the Lord with the directive *come to me* and the promise *your soul may/will live*.

2 Why spend money on what is not bread (cf. 44:20) refers to the benighted heathen lavishing toil and wealth in order to feed on ashes! Listen, listen is an infinitive absolute construction (*šim'û šāmōa'*) meaning ‘listen persistently’. It emphasizes listening and also what, exclusively, is to be heard. What is good is true food not ‘junk food’, the not bread of 2a. Your soul will delight denotes a satisfaction of heart, of the person itself, and contrasts with not satisfy.

3 Give ear and come refers to a response primarily of hearing, arising from a deliberate choice to do so (lit. ‘incline your ear’). It issues in action (come), whereby the word is obeyed and the invitation meets with response. What was metaphor, come to the waters (1), is now reality, come to me. The Lord is himself the feast. The me after hear should be omitted. The soul is the whole essential person. Just as true food restores the body debilitated by not bread, so the food of the Lord’s word brings the whole person to the life that is life indeed.

3c–5 The initial ‘And’ of verse 3c (omitted by the NIV) introduces an explanation of the promise in 3b that life is found within the blessings of an *everlasting covenant*, further defined as the promises to David, the world’s king (4). Faithful love translates a plural Hebrew word (*has^edē*; ‘unfailing kindnesses’, ‘steadfast loves’) which occurs thirteen times in the Old Testament; only Psalm 89:1 <2>, 33 <34>, 49 <50> is relevant here. The structure of this psalm is vital for our understanding of this plural word. (i) The Lord’s ‘steadfast loves’ frame the psalm. Verse 1 <2> announces them as the theme; verse 49 <50> pleads for their restoration. (ii) Verses 1–4 <2–5> define these ‘loves’ as the Lord’s covenant, pledging to David (verse 3 <4>) the continuance and dominance of his monarchy (verse 4 <5>). (iii) According to verses 5–14 <6–15>, heaven and earth will exult in this: Israel is the people blessed under the Lord’s king (verses 15–18 <16–19>). Smart, p. 222.(iv) This is because David has a particular place in the divine scheme as the Lord’s anointed (verses 19–21 <20–22>). Indeed, he will have dominion over the world (verses 22–27 <23–28>) because ‘my faithfulness and steadfast love [the singular, *hasdî*] shall be with him’ (verse 24 <25>). Furthermore, he will possess an enduring line (verses 28–37 <29–38>) because ‘my steadfast love [*hasdî*] I will keep for him for ever’. These two singulars (*hasdî*, verses 24 <25>, 28 <29>) together define the plurals (*has^edē*, verses 1 <2>, 49 <50>) with which the psalm

begins and ends: David will have world dominion and occupy an enduring throne.

In both [Isaiah 55:3](#) and [Psalm 89](#) the covenant is ‘for’ the recipient (here, ‘I will make an everlasting covenant for you’; [Ps. 89:3 <4>](#), ‘I have made a covenant for my chosen one’). The form *kārat l^e* is not always markedly different from *kārat ‘im/’et* (‘to make a covenant with’) but, nevertheless, it distinctively means ‘to make a covenant in favour of’, ‘to bring someone into the privileges the covenant specifies’. So then, Isaiah is saying ‘I will bring you [plural] into covenanted blessings, namely the promises to David of world rule and an enduring throne’. The plural pronoun refers back to those invited to the free banquet.¹¹³ Those invited to the feast come under the blessings of Davidic, world-wide and enduring rule (*cf.* [11:1–4, 6–9](#); [32:1–2](#); [33:17, 23–24](#)), and within that rule (as we shall note further below) find the soul-renewal which has been promised.

The double initial ‘Behold’ (*See* and *Surely/‘See’*) binds verses [4](#) and [5ab](#) together in an a-b-a-b pattern:

a¹ David is the Lord’s world witness ([4a](#))

b¹ David possesses the status of world leader ([4b](#))

a² David will address the world ([5a](#))

b² David will receive a world-wide response ([5b](#))

[4](#) The keyword *peoples* begins and ends the verse. David’s world-wide sway, thus emphasized, is stated in terms of ‘bearing witness’. North is, of course, correct in saying that nowhere else ‘is David said to be a “witness to the peoples” ...’,¹¹⁴ yet what is not

¹¹³ Commentators (*e.g.* Westermann) sometimes find here a new interpretation of the old covenant idea. The blessings formerly focused in the coming David are transferred to Israel, the people who will enjoy world dominion. Except in so far as this may deny a coming Messianic person (and thus contradict what Isaiah has earlier said) there is nothing alarming about the thought of a dominant people (*e.g.* [Rev. 5:9–10](#)). In context, however, the interpretation is unlikely, indeed impossible. It would force verse [3cd](#) out of alignment with verses [1–3b](#). The promise is that personal soul needs will be met. The *covenant* ([3c](#)) must be a pledge of these blessings. How can such blessings be bestowed by the mere granting of world dominion? In addition, why is there such a marked change from the plurals of verses [1–3](#) to verses [4–5](#), which are wholly occupied with a person addressed by singular verbs and pronouns?

¹¹⁴ North, *Second Isaiah*, p. 258.

said is implied. The idea of world testimony is rooted in the Davidic psalms (*e.g.* 9:11 <12> ; 18:49 <50> ; 57:9–11 <10–12> ; 108:3–4 <4–5> ; 145:21). Psalm 18 is particularly relevant in providing something of a model for the present passage (*cf.* Ps. 18:43 <44>, ‘a people I do not know [‘am lo’ yāda’tî] will serve me’, with verse 5 here, ‘a nation you do not know [gôy lō’ tēda’] you will call’). But even if Isaiah is not innovating in the thought of a Davidic call to the world, it is still proper to ask why it receives such prominence. The answer is that the book of the King (chapters 1–37) portrayed the Messiah as the fulfilment of the ideal in its royal aspects, but now Isaiah brings the values of the Servant-Messiah within the basic Davidic-Messianic model. It is the Servant, with his prophetic task (42:1–4; 49:2–3; 50:4), who fulfils the role of Davidic witness to the world. The Servant was heard saying ‘Listen to me, you islands; hear this, you distant nations’ (49:1), using the word *lēummîm*, with which this verse begins and ends. Psalm 89 once more provides significant background. In that psalm, whether it is understood as an actual humiliation of the Davidic king under the kings of the earth or as a ritual drama calling attention to an aspect of Davidic kingship, A. R. Johnson’s words are exact:

... the Davidic king, for all that he is a specially chosen Servant of the omnipotent, heavenly King, is a suffering Servant. He is the Messiah of Yahweh; but on this occasion, at least, he is a humble Messiah.¹¹⁵

In the tailpiece to the third Song (50:10–11) the true remnant of the people were identified by their listening to the Servant’s voice. Now the matching tailpiece to the final Song makes that same voice address the world, not only as the one who suffered for the world’s salvation but as the divinely nominated king whose right it is to reign. It is for this reason that the soul-renewing blessings of verses 1–3 are to be found within David’s reign, for the Servant and David are the same person. *Leader* (*nāḡîd*) is used thirteen times of the kings of Israel and Judah (of which seven refer to David) and is predominantly used to stress the divine appointment of the king. It is probably used for that reason here. *Commander* (*m̄ṣawwēh*) is used only here as a title, signifying the authoritative nature of the royal voice.

5ab *Nations* (*gôy*) is usually used of the world outside the pale of Israel. The words are

¹¹⁵ A. R. Johnson, *Sacral Kingship in Ancient Israel* (University of Wales Press, 1967), p. 113.

emphatic. The whole Gentile world is on the move to David. Verse 5a speaks of the extensiveness of the call, reaching beyond the known world; 5b of its effectiveness, overcoming ignorance and inducing eagerness (*hasten/run*). The *you* is singular, and the change from *him* in verse 4a, coupled with the dramatic ‘Behold ... Behold ...’, is a typical idiom of the prophets, introducing fresh emphasis by turning from description (4ab) to address (5ab).

5c–e Looking back over these verses, we see that the invitations (1) and the commands to listen (2–3b) have been supported by guarantees. First, the promised blessings are pledged by covenant (3c). Secondly, they are secured by the person and rule of the perpetual world king (3d–4); and thirdly, the Lord promises that he will himself be the magnet drawing the nations into the covenanted Davidic blessings (cf. 2:2–4; 1 Ki. 8:41). The nations will come because of *the Holy One of Israel, for he has endowed you with splendour/beautified you*. Such will be the magnetism that not even the jingoistic barrier of having to acknowledge the God of another nation will prevent the ingathering of the world (cf. the reference to ‘the God of Jacob’ in 2:3). Note the parallel with 49:7, where it is said that though the Servant is a servant of rulers yet the time would come when kings would stand and princes bow ‘because of the Lord who is trustworthy, the Holy One of Israel who has chosen you’. In both passages the Lord is the attraction. There he is seen in his appointed Servant and here in his appointed King. The Servant is this David who is to come; through whose dying and living again the blessings of David’s rule, the ‘sure mercies’, will be available.

A call to repent (55:6–13)

The rewritten brief of the Servant (49:1–6) arose out of the recognition (48:22) that there is no peace for the wicked. Consequently, there can be no unconditional call into blessing. Wickedness, objectively considered, has been dealt with by the Servant’s death; wickedness, subjectively considered, calls for repentance. If we may say that chapter 54 details the objective, God-given benefits of the Servant’s work, chapter 55 answers to its subjectivity in emphasizing the response which brings those benefits into personal experience. There is free entrance into life (1–5) through the moral and spiritual response of returning to God (6–11).

This passage consists of a three-part call on the theme of repentance (6–7), followed by a three-part substantiation of the call (8–9, 10–11, 12–13). Note that verses 8, 10 and

¹² all begin with the explanatory ‘For’ and each of the substantiations contains an illustration drawn from nature.

A A tripartite call ([6–7](#))

a¹ To seek the Lord ([6](#))

a² To forsake sin ([7ab](#))

a³ To return to the Lord ([7cd](#))

B A tripartite substantiation of the call ([8–13](#))

b¹ The distinctive/different divine nature ([8–9](#))

b² The fruit-bearing word ([10–11](#))

b³ The assured future ([12–13](#))

The terms of a² (*way, thoughts*) are taken up in b¹, with the consequent implication of a God distinct and distanced from sinners. Thus, the call to repent is backed by urgency to get right with such a God. The vocabulary of ‘returning’ ($\sqrt{\text{šub}}$) is used in a³ of the returning sinner and in b² of the returning word. Like the rain, the word is effective in bringing forth fruit. To align oneself with the word which calls for seeking, forsaking and returning is, therefore, a sure way home to God. Finally, those who are commanded to seek the Lord (a¹) are given the reassuring prospect of *peace* (b³).

6 *Seek* is used not in the sense of looking for what is lost but of coming with commitment to one known to be there (e.g. [Dt. 12:5](#)). *While he may be found ... while he is near* implies urgency, a limited time of opportunity. The reason for this comes in chapters [56–66](#). We could translate *while he may be found* as ‘while he permits himself to be found’ (tolerative niphil), indicating a divinely determined day of grace and salvation. *Near* ($qārōb$) is part of the vocabulary of next-of-kinship ([Ru. 2:20; 3:12; 4:4](#)). In [Leviticus 25:25](#) it is associated with the *gō'ēl*, the redeemer, and the linguistically sensitive Isaiah must have intended this. Thus, there is a fixed period when the Lord may be found as Next-of-kin to all who seek him.

7¹¹⁶ Dowsett catches the thrust of this verse exactly by saying ‘we come to the Lord as

¹¹⁶ Understanding verses [1–6](#) as a call to the Babylonian exiles to participate in the march home, Westermann can only marvel at verse [7](#) (‘How is the sense of this passage as just given to get over verse [7](#)?’). He finds that it has ‘no bearing on the situation to which the prophet addresses himself’ and must be regarded as a reader’s addition to the text. He does not observe the change that

we are, but not to stay as we are'.¹¹⁷ Both sides of repentance (forsaking and returning) are here, just as are both sides of the Lord's response (subjectively, *mercy/compassion*, the surging love of the divine heart [cf. 54:8, 10]; objectively, *pardon*, the actual forgiveness of sins). *Wicked* (*rāšā*) is a word with as broad a meaning in Hebrew as in English, saving that in Hebrew it is also used for 'guilty before the law'. *Evil man* ('îš 'āwen) is difficult to pinpoint as 'āwen is many-faceted. It is used of life's troubles (twenty-six times; e.g. Gn. 35:18); of those who are trouble-makers ('doers of' 'āwen) towards other people and provocative towards the Lord (eighteen times; e.g. Jb. 11:11); and of false worship (eight times; e.g. Zc. 10:2). It is thus a useful word in a passage like this, which recalls people from every aspect of a life astray from God. *Way* and *thoughts* refer to the lifestyle and the philosophy of life behind it, the *thoughts* which are entertained in the mind and formulated into plans. *Turn* is 'turn back, return'. *And he will/that he may have mercy* denotes the purpose at which the return aims; *for he will freely pardon* provides the balancing reassurance that repentance is sure to meet a favourable response. *Mercy* ($\sqrt{rāham}$, 'compassion') is the overflowing love of 54:7–8, 10 ('that he may let his love surge over you'). *Pardon* ($\sqrt{sālah}$), with its related noun (Ne. 9:17; Ps. 130:4; Dn. 9:9) and adjective (Ps. 86:5), is used only of God. It seems to specify forgiveness as related to the offence sin gives to God (Lv. 4:20, 26, 31, 35; Dt. 29:20ff.; Je. 5:1–7) and hence the idea of restoration to divine fellowship by the removal of the barrier sin erected.

8–9 This is the first substantiating statement (see the outline and note above). Smart says these verses

lay open the abyss between God and the community ... the abyss that startled the first Isaiah when the holiness of God revealed to him the unholiness of Israel; the deadly abyss between themselves and God that can be bridged only by their responding with their whole being to God's offer of forgiveness.

This truly states the implication of the common vocabulary in verses 7ab and 8–9. The relation between the divine and human mind and life is stated, not by comparison but in terms of contrariness, with a stark *not ... neither*. As in chapter 6 Isaiah moved from

has come over the prophet's message since 48:22 or the relationship of chapters 54–55 to 52:13–53:12.

¹¹⁷ In an unpublished lecture given at Christ Church, Westbourne in April 1987.

the vision of holiness (verse 3) to the acknowledgement of transcendence (verse 5), so here the plight of the sinner (7) is not the damage sin may do to his or her person, life and aspirations, but how he or she stands (8) before the transcendent God. It is across this infinite gulf that the voice of God (6–7) calls to repentance.

9 This verse offers the first of the illustrations drawn from nature. The towering height of heaven above earth offers some standard by which to assess the height of God's ways *etc.* over ours. To the question 'How much higher?' the only answer is 'Immeasurably', prompting, as it is intended to do, the thought that what a wonderful thing repentance must be if it can bridge such a gap! Can so small a thing be so effective, and if so, wherein lies its power?

10–11 The second natural illustration turns on a different relationship between heaven and earth. There is a gift which comes from heaven; it is absolutely given (it does *not return*), effectively brings life (*making it bud and flourish*) and provides totally for human need (*seed* and *bread*). The parallel between the life agency of rain and the effective word is exact. Each has a heavenly origin and power of effectiveness and neither fails. The application of this truth is, first, more specific: *from heaven* becomes *from my mouth*. The word is directly the word of the Lord. It is, secondly, less specific in that the stated result (*seed, bread*) becomes the undefined *what I desire ... the purpose for which I sent it*. The word of God is the unfailing agent of the will of God. The outline on p. 452 indicates what word is meant in this context; the whole chapter pivots on the call to repent. On the one hand, repentance is the way to enter the great, free feast; on the other hand, the call to repent is a word of God bringing with it its own power of accomplishment. As the rain furnishes both seed and bread, so the word of God plants the seed of repentance in the heart and feeds the returning sinner with the blessed consequences repentance produces. In the present context this is *what I desire, the purpose for which I sent it*. The Lord wills and effectuates the repentance which brings sinners home to himself, into the freedom of his banqueting hall.

12–13 The initial 'For' of verse 12 introduces the third substantiating statement. *You* (plural) matches the pronouns in verses 8–9. The 'you' who were so far from God now enter into *peace* (12b). This is the same group to whom the 'you' of the plural imperatives of verse 6 was directed, and the thrust of verses 12–13 is to encourage response by affirming the joys that await, *i.e.* new life in a new world. *Go out* is an exodus and exile

metaphor. It speaks of the joy of erstwhile slaves and prisoners leaving captivity, but a greater liberation is in mind, *i.e.* the fruition of the Servant's work in bringing a worldwide people to the Lord. *Joy* is the inner transformation of the person; *peace* (*cf.* 53:5; 54:10), a new relationship with God. They will be *led forth* by the Lord himself (42:16; 52:12). The personal transformations of verse 12ab are surrounded by environmental transformations. Creation is released in a new-found joy (12c–f) and enters into a new relationship with its Creator. The disappearance of *thornbush* and *briers* symbolizes the removal of the curse that followed sin (Gn. 3:17f.). It is ‘a transformation of nature which reverses the curse ... “Paradise Regained” ...’. *Thornbush* (*na'asûṣ*) is found only in 7:19; *briers* (*sirpād*) is of uncertain meaning, possibly ‘stinging nettle’ (from $\sqrt{sāpād}$, ‘to wail’). Did Isaiah invent a botanical name resonant of the sorrows of a fallen world? Suggested translations of *pine* and *myrtle* (*bērōš*, *hādas*) vary, but the evergreen nature of the trees is a constant. The symbols of death and the curse are replaced by those of life. *This will be for the LORD’s renown* is ‘And it will become a name for the Lord’. ‘Name’ sums up what is revealed about the divine nature.

Conquerors in the ancient world were accustomed to set up memorials that would preserve their names and tell of their conquests ... The transformed earth would be a memorial of God’s victory ... forever a sign of the power of the living God ... a transformed earth, a transformed community, a transformed humanity ...¹¹⁸

To be a touch more exact, however, it is not the Lord’s power that is thus revealed, but the Lord’s ‘name’, his own inner nature, the sort of God he is. The transformed people in a transformed world will be an *everlasting sign*, will ‘signify’ who and what the Lord is. When people respond to the Lord’s word calling them to seek, forsake and return (6–7), the effective power of that word (10–11) brings them into an experience of the love, forgiveness (7) and peace (12) of God and lifts them into membership of a new world of eternal duration. This is what the Servant accomplished.

Isaiah 56–66

¹¹⁸ Smart, p. 228.

The book of the Anointed Conqueror

For a general introduction to chapters 56–66 see pp. 22f. Within the editorial unity of the Isaianic literature we are intended to read straight from 55:13 into 56 and to note that 56:1de recapitulates 51:5, the imminence of the Lord's 'righteousness' and 'salvation'. We could, therefore, entitle these final chapters, 'Characteristics of a waiting people'. But reading further, we discover that it is a world-wide people Isaiah has in mind (e.g. 56:1–8; 65:1; 66:18ff.) and that while they engage themselves in this interim with seeking the blessings of an obedient life (56:1–8; 58:1–14) they are also to watch for new acts of the Lord. For at the heart of these chapters lies the vision of an Anointed One (59:21; 61:1–3; 61:10–62:7; 63:1–6) with the double task of salvation and vengeance (e.g. 61:2; 63:4–5). It is this figure, the Anointed Conqueror, who like the King in chapters 1–37 and the Servant in chapters 38–55, stamps his person and work on the final movement of Isaiah's thought as the following diagrammatic outline shows.

A¹ The world-wide people keeping the Lord's Sabbath (56:1–8)

B¹ Two parties in tension: opposition, peace and no-peace (56:9–57:21)

A² The Sabbath-test: standards for a holy people (58:1–14)

C¹ Sin and need: the Lord's people confess (59:1–13)

D The Lord and his Anointed: the day of vengeance, the year of redemption
(59:14–63:6)

C² Sin and need: the Lord's people intercede (63:7–64:12)

A³ The world-wide people responding (65:1)

B² Two parties in tension: opposition, inclusion and exclusion (65:2–66:17)

A⁴ The world-wide people keeping Sabbath with the Lord (66:18–24)

This balanced presentation has a distinct 'story-line': the Lord's world-wide people are introduced as the Sabbath-people and as such are called (56:1–8) to live in righteousness until the Lord's righteousness is revealed (56:1). But all is not well among those who claim to be the Lord's people. There is failure (56:10–11) and religious declension (57:3ff.), as well as righteousness (57:1), contrition and humility (57:15), and between these two groups, tension and animosity even to the extent that the righteous are perishing (57:1). Yet there is also the promise of peace (57:14–21), though not for all.

But what is involved in this call to righteousness? The Sabbath ([58:1–14](#)) is the standard to be applied, but the initial command ([58:1](#)) to make the people aware of rebellion and sin indicates that it is a test which all alike fail. Consequently, in [59:1–13](#) the charge of sin is levelled ([59:1–3](#)), sin is described ([4–8](#)) and confessed ([9ff.](#)). But what can be done about it? The words ‘the LORD looked’ ([59:15](#)) indicate a dramatic turning point. Taking note of his people’s inability to live up to the standards of righteousness he has set ([56:1](#); [59:14](#)), the hostility faced by those who would live by the truth and shun evil ([59:15](#)) and the absence of any to help ([59:16](#)), the Lord clothes himself for the tasks of salvation and vengeance ([59:16–17](#)). This thought forms an inclusio ([63:4–5](#)) to the whole mid-section. In the event, however, the Lord’s proposed action devolves upon his Anointed One ([61:1–2, 10; 63:1–6](#)). The remaining chapters consist of prayer ([63:7–64:12](#)) and response ([65:1–66:24](#)). According to [62:6](#), the Anointed One appoints ‘watchmen’/‘remembrancers’ (*mazkîrîm*) to pray for divine intervention. [63:7](#) introduces a ‘remembrancer’ (*azkîr*), praying that the Lord would ‘rend the heavens and come down’ ([64:1](#)). The divine response begins ([65:1](#)) by affirming the success of the objective of a world-wide people and proceeds to promise a final settlement; the apportioning of mutually exclusive destinies and the setting up of the new heavens and the new earth ([65:2–66:17](#)). The culmination of it all is the vision of the world-wide people keeping the Sabbath with the Lord ([66:18–24](#)). Thus, in the foregoing outline, sections A¹, B¹, A² and C¹ develop the theme of the needs of the true people of the Lord world-wide to be rescued from their experience of sin and failure and to be delivered from their enemies. The great central section (D) is the Lord’s commitment to this work of salvation and vengeance, acting through the person of the Anointed One, and sections C², A³, B² and A⁴ reveal the Lord, in answer to prayer, pledging to do all that he has promised. We would indeed be blind not to observe that [56:1](#) reflects precisely where the church stands today: looking back to the once-for-all redemption at Calvary ([52:13–53:12](#)) and awaiting a final divine act which will rescue the church from sin, failure and opposition and deal finally with any and every counterforce.

A. The ideal and the actual: the needs and sins of the Lord’s people

(56:1–59:13)

The coherence of this section (A¹, B¹, A², C¹ in the outline above) can be shown like this:

- a¹ The Sabbath at the centre of a world-wide, harmonious people (56:1–8)
- b¹ The actual people: divided, hostile, a mingling of the ‘righteous’ and the compromisers, separate in life and destiny (56:9–57:21)
- a² The Sabbath as a standard—and a proof of failure (58:1–14)
 - b² The confessions of a people who failed (59:1–13)

The actual mocks the ideal at the very point where the ideal was to be expressed, the Sabbath, and the spiritually zealous among the people are driven to a despairing confession.

a. World people, Sabbath people, praying people (56:1–8)

Isaiah was deeply involved with the political leaders of his day, though he had scant success in winning them to his view of the proper policy for the people of the Lord in this world. He rightly saw that for Judah to be involved in international power-politics, to sign military pacts, and to join organizations of collective security spelled the end of any demonstration of a different life-style such as could have been a magnet to the nations (*cf.* 2:2–4 with the sad contrast of 2:5–8). There was, therefore, no lack of occasion on which he might have held up to his contemporaries this mirror of the ideal (56:1–8). But when he came to compose his book, where better would this lovely oracle find itself at home than in carrying forward the thought of the universal people arising out of the work of the Servant. Chapter 55 summoned all alike to the free banquet; 56:1–8 portrays the gathering people in which all are at one, all are equal, all are welcome in the house of prayer

- A¹ The blessing yet to come: the task of the waiting people (1)
 - B¹ Blessing, all inclusive, conditionally enjoyed (2)
 - B² Blessing, excluding none (3–7)
 - a¹ No divine reason for exclusion (3ab)
 - b¹ No human reason for disappointment (3cd)
 - b² Blessing which more than compensates (4–5)
 - a² The joy of welcome into the Lord’s family (6–7)

A²The blessing yet to come: the gathering people (8)

The blessing yet to come, conditionally enjoyed (56:1–2)

1 This command in the present resting on a promise for the future is typical of biblical ethics (*cf.* the message of John the Baptist; Mt. 3:2): *Do what is right*/‘righteousness’ ... *for my righteousness will soon be revealed*. The call to practise righteousness matches 51:1, where those who model their lives on the Servant (50:10) are described as ‘pursuing righteousness’ (*cf.* 51:7); the promise of the Lord’s righteousness soon to come corresponds with 51:5 (*cf.* 46:13; 51:6, 8). The contention often urged that the concept of ‘doing righteousness’ is somehow different in chapters 56–66 from, say, in 40–55 is not borne out by examination of the passages where the word occurs. Isaiah is not inviting people to seek salvation by their own works of righteousness but urging (along with the rest of the Bible) those who belong to the Lord to devote themselves to the life that reflects what he has revealed to be right. Taken together, *justice* and *what is right*/‘righteousness’¹ point respectively to the Lord’s law (what he has ‘judged’ to be right) and the Lord’s character (his righteous person). In 51:1 pursuing righteousness is parallel to seeking the Lord; in 51:7 those who know righteousness have his law in their hearts. When it says that the Lord’s righteousness is about to come, the meaning is that in a future event the fulness of his righteous character and the fulness of his righteous ways of working will be revealed. It will be a work of *salvation*, *i.e.* rescue and deliverance, for his people. The remainder of chapters 56–66 reveal that the *salvation* in which his *righteousness* will be revealed is, on the one hand, the deliverance of his people from the whole environment and plague of sin, and on the other hand, his devastating and merited judgment on those who rebel against him.

2 This looks back to the commands of verse 1. The duty of waiting for the Lord’s coming act and of filling the waiting days with a life which obeys his law and imitates his character is open to all without exception. The word for *man* in *Blessed is the man* is ‘*enôš*, man in his ordinary humanity with all its weakness; *the man who holds it fast* is *ben ’âdâm*, the ‘son of man’, the one who shares in the common humanity of all. Gone are

¹ The combination ‘justice and righteousness’ is found more often in Isaiah than in any other book. A third of the total occurrences are in Isaiah, twelve in chapters 1–33, four in chapters 56–66.

the old boundaries of descent and privilege. Such thinking, of course, is inherent in Zion theology (2:2–4; Pss. 47; 87) and has its ultimate root in the Abrahamic promise of universal blessing (Gn. 12:3). In the immediate context, however, the root is the work of the Servant bringing home the tribes of Jacob and proving himself to be the Lord's salvation to the ends of the earth (49:5–6). *Does* and *holds* are imperfects of continuous action, referring not to a moment of decision but to living perseverance: 'keeps doing', 'keeps a grip on'. This strong emphasis on *the Sabbath* has prompted many to write a post-exilic scenario for these passages, noting the Sabbath emphasis in Nehemiah 10:31; 13:15. There is, however, no compelling necessity about this. The Sabbath was an equally strong factor in pre-exilic days. Isaiah 1:13 and Amos. 8:5 reveal the very sort of formal punctilio that 58:1–14 rejects. The exilic Ezekiel looks back to profanation of the Sabbath as a pre-exilic sin (Ezk. 20:12, 20; 22:8, 26) and Jeremiah makes Sabbath observance a test case (17:19–27), just as Isaiah does. Superficially the argument is impressive that the exile put an end to many things which had been the substance of Israelite self-consciousness—the city and the temple with its services and sacrifices were all gone. Thus it is commonplace to urge that when, in the exile, these unifying, characterizing externals were removed, the Sabbath and circumcision remained as the 'cement' of the people of God in a heathen environment. Von Rad writes that while both Sabbath and circumcision had

certainly been long observed in Israel ... living as exiles among a people who did not practise circumcision, the good old usage here became all at once a token of the difference. The same is true of the Sabbath ... it was in the Exile that the Sabbath and circumcision won a *status confessionis* which they afterwards preserved
....²

To a very large extent this is simply using theory to fill in a gap in knowledge. We do not know to what extent a conquered and imported people would be free in Babylon to

² G. von Rad, *Old Testament Theology* (Oliver and Boyd, 1962), vol. 1, p. 79. Cf. R. S. Foster, *The Restoration of Israel* (Darton, Longman and Todd, 1970), pp. 59, 63; Knight, *Isaiah 56–66*, p. 5: 'Actually the ever-recurring Sabbath day was the only institution the people possessed that was able to hold them together ... those long fifty years ... That is why the Sabbath remained a sign of hope to the exiles ...'.

organize their week on the basis of the Sabbath-rest. It is at least as possible that the New Testament's omission of any quotation of the fourth commandment is a better paradigm of conditions in a Babylonian situation. We do know, however, that pre-exilic religious formalism corrupted the meaning of the Sabbath and needed the corrective Isaiah applies in chapter 58; and it should cause us no surprise that Isaiah entertained the high view of the Sabbath implied here, or indeed that it figures so largely in a passage which speaks of the world-wide people. As Knight points out:

Persians, Babylonians, Canaanites, Egyptians, Greeks—none of these ever thought of “stopping” work (as the word means literally) one day in seven so as to give ordinary people ... a complete day of rest. Keeping God’s Sabbath meant, moreover, that those same commonfolk might be taught to possess a God-centred theology
...³

Nothing would be a clearer outward demonstration of leaving the ‘world’ and joining the Lord’s people than the adoption of an institution which necessitated the wholesale reorganizing of life around the requirements and worship of Israel’s God. *Keeps the Sabbath* is the positive reordering of life around God and *keeps his hand from doing any evil* is the negative restraint of personal behaviour from doing wrong.

Blessing, excluding none (56:3–7)

The *foreigner* and the *eunuch* are offered as striking cases in point of the all-embracing inclusiveness of verse 2. The Old Testament was never exclusivist on a nationalistic basis. Deuteronomy 23:3ff. dealt with specific matters requiring special treatment, but Exodus 12:48–49 expresses the general position that the ‘stranger’ was always a welcome convert. Ezra and Nehemiah have been sadly misunderstood as if their motive was exclusivism. Their problem was to preserve the identity and purity of the people of God at a time when these things were under threat. This is a vital task, for if the people of God lose distinctiveness there is nothing for anyone to join nor any good reason for seeking to do so! An inclusive objective requires a distinctive base of operation. Their position was no different from that of Isaiah in his combating of foreign political entanglements, and indeed the glorious universalism which he preached was not to be worked out in terms of unconditional inclusion, as this present passage shows.

³Knight, *Isaiah 56–66*, pp. 4–5.

3 The *foreigner* comes fearing either rejection of his request for membership or that, having been accepted, he will still remain in a ‘separated’ category as a second-class citizen. All such fears are groundless. Regarding the *eunuch*, Deuteronomy 23:1 does not make it clear on what precise ground such were excluded from the assembly, though the most common view is that ‘the physical defects mentioned may not have been due to simple accidents, but rather to pagan rites’.⁴ A. D. H. Mayes offers a fuller view by referring also to ‘the inadmissibility of physical mutilation as contrary to the design of God’s creation’ and to ‘a specific rejection of any action which destroys the procreative power of Israelites’.⁵ The matter is probably left designedly vague here. No-one is excluded from membership of God’s people, either by nation or ancestry (the *foreigner*), accident of birth, parental or personal former affiliation to another god, falling below the creational standards of God or deep and fundamental personal defect (*the eunuch*). Middle walls of partition have come tumbling down between people and between people and the Lord.

4–5 *Keep* and *choose* are imperfects of habitual action, denoting persistence in conformity to the Sabbath-code and in personal commitment to the Lord’s will. On *pleases me* (✓ *ḥāpēš*) cf. of the Lord’s ‘will and pleasure’ in 53:10; 55:11. And *hold fast* is probably the explanatory use of the conjunction, a summary statement of what *keep* and *choose* mean: ‘that is/in a word, those who grip my covenant’. Since the Lord’s covenant is first the pledge he makes (his covenant promises), ‘taking a grip on his covenant’ means taking his promises seriously so as to hold to them by faith through thick and thin. To those, however, who are within his covenant, the Lord speaks his gracious covenant law, teaching them how to live so as to please him. In this case, ‘taking a grip on his covenant’ expresses the practical life of obedience. The background to *a memorial and a name* (5) is found in 2 Samuel 18:18, where the childless Absalom sought to perpetuate himself by a memorial stone which would last beyond his own life-span.⁶ It is essential to translate *temple* as ‘house’ in order to establish the link with verse 7bef, and also to

⁴ D. F. Payne, *Deuteronomy*, *The Daily Study Bible* (St Andrew Press, 1985), p. 130. Cf. P. C. Craigie, *The Book of Deuteronomy* (NIC).

⁵ A. D. H. Mayes, *Deuteronomy* (NCB, 1979). This whole note is well worth reading.

⁶ It is hard to think that any eunuch would have felt rising excitement for Duhm’s view that the promise here is of a memorial tablet within the precincts!

restore the second and literal ‘within’ before *its walls*. The eunuch is welcome ‘in my house—yes, right inside my walls’, not just vaguely within the precincts but right into the very divine presence! He is there on an *everlasting* basis, enjoying a blessedness which cannot be forfeited (*not cut off*). *I will give them*/‘him’ is an individualizing singular; each is there in his own person (*name*) and is enriched with blessings far beyond those which even an earthly family (*sons and daughters*) might have brought. In 55:13, by gathering in a world-wide people the Lord makes for himself a name that will not be cut off. Here he shares that reality with those who were formerly excluded but have now become members of his house.

6–7 In the stylish a-b-b-a pattern of verses 3–7 (see above) Isaiah returns to the *foreigners*. For the second time they are described as ‘those who have joined themselves to the Lord’ (verse 6a is identical with verse 3a) because personal decision is involved (Ru. 1:16–18; 2:11–12; 2 Sa. 15:19–22). Eunuchs might well have been born Israelites but foreigners had to make costly decisions. Serve ($\sqrt{\text{šārat}}$) is typically used of Levites, a hint looking forward to 66:21. *To love the name of the LORD* shows that the decision was not to join a system or identify with a people but one of personal devotion to the Lord in all that he has revealed himself to be; devotion to a person, resting on revealed truth (Dt. 11:22; Jos. 2:8–11; 9:9; 1 Ki. 8:41ff.). Note the progression in verse 7: they are welcome to the place where the Lord is to be found (*my holy mountain*), into his presence and family (*my house of prayer*), and to those ordinances which effect and guarantee acceptance and fellowship (*my altar*) (cf. Ps. 43:3–4). The conclusion *for my house will be called a house of prayer for all nations* probably looks back over the whole of verses 3–7d. The welcome extended to foreigners and eunuchs is not a concession but a fulfilment; this is what the Lord’s house was always meant to be (1 Ki. 8:41ff.). By specifying it to be a *house of prayer* Isaiah is not in any way denigrating the fact that it was a house of sacrifice, nor is he contrasting a ‘spiritual’ with a (merely) ‘cultic’ religion. The essential element in the house was always the enjoyment of the Lord’s presence and fellowship, with the sacrifices functioning as the basis on which the people were accepted and maintained in the divine, holy presence. It was through the ministry of the altar that Isaiah found himself enjoying a speaking relationship with the Lord (6:7–8), and his experience was a micro-cosm of the whole.

The blessing yet to come: the gathered people (56:8)

The *n^eum* formula (cf. 1:24; 22:25; 49:18) usually follows the words to which it calls attention as being a divine ‘utterance’. Here, with very impressive emphasis, it comes first: *The Sovereign LORD declares*. The order (*Israel* and then *still others*) follows that of 49:6. He first gathers (lit.) ‘the scattered ones of Israel’ (the reference is neither to the Babylonian exile nor to geographical dispersal but to those scattered from the Lord), and then *others* (the foreigners and eunuchs of verses 3–7; the implied ‘whosoever’ of verse 2) are gathered in. *Besides those already gathered* is either ‘besides his gathered ones’ (RV) or, better, ‘to be his gathered ones’, *i.e.* gathered by the same sovereign Lord to become one gathered people.

b. Two parties: problem and solution (56:9–57:21)

Two oracles are brought together to form this section. The first (56:9–12) is a condemnation of self-seeking leadership, and the second (57:1–21), a ground-level view of life, exposing the tension between *the righteous* (57:1) and those who have joined the cults (3–13) and forgotten the Lord (11). Corresponding to these two groups there is a double forecast. The one enters into peace (2, 19), the Lord dwells with them (15) and prepares for them a way home (14); the other he abandons to such help as their idols can give (13), and they do not know peace (20f.). Plainly, therefore, the ideal of verses 1–8 is far from being realized. The style as well as the substance of these oracles proclaims disorder. The abrasiveness of the subject is matched by a sort of savagery in the Hebrew, especially in the harshness and irony of the opening oracle.

The feasters and the feast: the failure of leadership (56:9–12)

The critique of leadership offered here is wholly one of character not of policy. The opinion that from the point of view of the public it matters only what the government’s policy is, but the private lives of leaders is their own affair, finds no support. The juxtaposition of 56:9–12 with 57:1–21 insists that private wrong and public right do not co-exist.

A¹ A feast of food: open invitation to the beasts (9)

B Leadership failure (10–11)

B¹ Watchmen, no concern for public security (10a–d)

B² Insatiable self-concern (10e–11b)

B³ Shepherds, no care except for themselves (11c–e)

A² A feast of wine: endless abundance (12)

The A sections are linked by the common summons *Come* ('ētāyû) and by the contrast between food and drink. The B sections are four-line stanzas and each one contains the words 'they do not know' (*lō yādē'û*). In 10b, *they all lack knowledge* is simply 'they do not know'; in 11b, *they never have enough* is 'they do not know satisfaction'; in 11c, *who lack understanding* is 'they do not know discernment'. B¹ and B² refer to *dogs*; B¹ and B³ say 'they all' (*kullām*). Nothing can recapture the taut anger of the Hebrew but even in translation the biting irony of the bracketing verses 9 and 12 is unmistakable. By the time the poem reaches verse 12 the leadership believes itself never to have had it so good, and we hear delighted voices calling to feasting, promising unending supply. They do not know that the wild beasts have already been invited (9). Such a piece is timeless in its applicability to the Davidic kings, and to the opportunist adventurers who seized the northern throne. For each, sooner or later, the beasts arrived at the feast.

9 *Devour* is a translation tailored to the fact that beasts are addressed; the Hebrew word is the ordinary 'polite' verb 'to eat'. After all, they are being asked to the palace! The motif of the advent and dominance of the beasts figures abandonment of the law of the Lord (Lv. 26:22; Dt. 28:26; 32:24; 2 Ki. 17:25) and here announces the judgment theme, which verses 10–11 justify and which the inclusio in verse 12 brings to completion.

10–11 The titles which open the first and third stanzas here, *watchmen* (10a) and *shepherds* (11c), contrast two aspects of the true leader—to guard from external danger and to care for internal need. It is very tempting to follow Q^a and to allow the middle stanza to open not with *hōzîm* (*they lie around*/‘panting’) but with *hōzîm* (‘seers’), thereby completing the picture with an ‘upward’ reference to the spiritual leadership of bringing a word from the Lord. But the change is too obvious to be impressive, and on the whole the balance of wording in the three stanzas is against it, especially the reference to *dogs* which ties the second stanza to the first. Two words lie side by side in verse 10a, *watchmen* and *blind*, and in verse 10c, *dogs* and *mute*. We are invited to sense the ludicrousness of it, to laugh were it not tragic. The charge in verse 10 is the simple accusation ‘they do not know’ (10b, see above), they lack the basic qualifications for their office. *They lie around* is a participle ($\sqrt{hāzā}$) not used elsewhere. Watts advocates ‘dreamers’, following the LXX *enhypniazomai*, but KB offers ‘panting’. *Dream* is ‘lying

^aThe St Mark’s Isaiah Scroll from Qumran.

down'. To this picture of indolence the final lines of the stanza (11ab) add insatiable greed. The eyes of the leaders, which should be turned outwards, whether in guardianship (10a–d) or in care (11c–f), are turned inwards to their own welfare. The third stanza opens (11c) with an indignant outburst: 'And *these* are *shepherds*!'. Just as they cannot see approaching danger (10a), so they 'do not know to discern' (1c); they have not a true shepherd's sensitivity to the needs of the flock. *They all turn*/‘they have all turned’ is reminiscent of 53:6. *Gain* (*besa'*), a word with a regularly bad meaning, denotes gain by violence, without scruple. The Hebrew adds that *each* [utterly] *seeks*, i.e. is wholly absorbed in seeking.⁷

12 On 'Come' see verse 9 and the outline notes above. *Each one cries* is an NIV addition. The emphasis now (cf. verse 9) is on alcohol in the feast (cf. 5:11–12; 28:7–8). The oracle may have belonged originally to stable times where no coming threat to 'having it so good' was evident over the horizon, or to a time (like chapter 22) when the careless rapture of leaders and people alike was proof against all warning. To incompetence (10), self-concern (11ab) and selfish preoccupation (11cef), the rulers added complacency about *tomorrow*.

At ground level: the prostitute's brood and the household of God (57:1–21)

The view of society at palace level (56:9–12) is now replaced by a view of society at the popular level, where the righteous perish (1), people get caught up with cults and 'isms' (3–5) and are carried along helplessly on the tide of national policies they are powerless to stop (9–10). Here God seems strangely remote, yet some find him close at hand (15), and there are those who live with a peace and confidence which is by no means the experience of all (19–21). In other words, Isaiah's penetrating diagnosis reveals that more is needed than the forgiveness of sins before the people of God can call themselves saved. There are forces of wrong, of many kinds, that need to be dealt with and removed; enticements to error as well as actual threats to life itself which create an environment inimical to godliness. The actual settings in which the Lord's people

⁷ *miqqāṣēhû* is (lit.) 'from his end/extremity'. Cf. Gn. 19:4, where the same usage occurs (but without a possessive pronoun), *miqqāṣeh*, 'from extremity', i.e. 'from (one) end (to the other)'. Hence here, 'from end to end of him' means not that all are like in being unscrupulous but that each is wholly unscrupulous.

live call for acts of God in the realm of judgment and rescue.

The central theme of the passage is the contrast between the prostitute's family and the Lord's family. Verses 3–5 (second person plural masculine verbs) examine the prostitute's family, and in verses 6–13d (second person singular feminine verbs) we meet the prostitute herself. In parallel with this, verse 15 introduces the Lord and his household; and parallel to the doings of the prostitute (6–13d) are the sovereign acts of God (16–19a) whereby he took those who merited his wrath, healed and comforted them and enabled them to repent and mourn before him. Around these passages there is a framework of peace (1–2, 19b–21), and between them, acting as a transition section, are verses 13e–14.

A¹ Peace: the actual peace of the righteous (1–2)

B¹ The prostitute and her family (3–13d)

a The family (3–5)

b The prostitute's ways (6–13d)

C¹ Conclusion and transition: trust and inheritance (13ef)

C² Transition and introduction: the homeward road (14)

B² The Lord and his household (15–19)

a The Holy One and his household (15)

b The Lord's work: healing, comforting, peace (16–19)

A² Peace: the impossibility of peace for the wicked (20–21)

The internal divisions in the people evident in this passage (*cf.* 65:2–66:17; see the outline above) are frequently explained with reference to a supposed post-exilic situation. It is said that the exiles returned to cramped circumstances in Jerusalem and its immediate environs. They found there those who had escaped deportation to Babylon as well as foreigners who had drifted in during the empty years. There was also the mixed population further north in Samaria. All this made a fertile seed-bed of dissension.⁸ This scenario is part of the justification for seeing chapters 56–66 as belonging to, and descriptive of, post-exilic Judah. If this is the case and these chapters are to be accredited to a post-exilic 'Trito-Isaiah', it is strange that the sins specified are those

⁸ See Whybray, p. 40. Cf. P. D. Hanson, *The Dawn of Apocalyptic* (Fortress, 1975); Foster, *Restoration of Israel*.

well-known in Isaiah's Jerusalem, and the religious aberrations which lay at the heart of the tension between the 'righteous' and the rest are those of pre-exilic paganism. The divided community of 8:11–20 provides a more than adequate background, and we find that what Isaiah expressed in chapter 8 as principles of division are here translated into actual experiences. Whether this passage was composed for its present place and function or whether (more probably) it is a skilful mosaic of pre-existing material we cannot possibly be sure. Either way it bears the marks of the master hand of Isaiah.

Peace: the actual peace of the righteous (57:1–2)

These verses are a nine-line poem with three pairs of lines (1) followed by three single lines (2):

The righteous perishes and no-one takes it to heart	(singular)
God's loved ones are gathered away	(plural)
but no-one discerns that it is from trouble to come the righteous is gathered away	(singular)
He enters peace	(singular)
They rest on their beds	(plural)
Walker in his uprightness	(singular)

The alternation between singular and plural is designed to express both the general truth of the safety and peace of the righteous and to apply it to each individual. The paired lines are bound together by an inclusio, *the righteous*, which is the first and last word in the Hebrew (*cf.* the parallel use of *the wicked* in verses 20–21). The single lines are bound together by their form, each line containing the equivalent of two Hebrew words. The general picture is clear: as Knight says, 'loyal Yahweh worshippers ... were actually being persecuted ... even "disappearing" ...'.⁹ Such could have been the case in the tense panic implied in 8:9–20 or under the religiously malign Manasseh (*cf.*

⁹ Knight, *Isaiah 56–66*, p. 12.

[5:22–23](#); [29:20f.](#); [Am. 5:13](#); [Mi. 2:8–9](#); [3:1–3](#)). But behind the experience which the world (and often the sufferer) fails to understand, the instructed eye sees a different purpose and another outcome. The *righteous* is not ‘perishing’ but entering peace; the ‘gathering’ is not purposeless but is a mercy extended to such as would find the burden of coming trouble more than they could bear, and consequently they are mercifully removed before it strikes.

[1](#) *Devout men* (*'anšē hesed'*) is ‘men of unfailing love’. Just as *righteous* means ‘those right with God’ (and therefore committed to righteousness of life) so ‘men of unfailing love’ means those on whom the steadfast love of God has been poured (and who therefore seek to reflect that love in their lives). *No-one ponders* has overtones of [53:8](#); the righteous share the righteousness of the Servant ([53:11](#); [54:17](#)), and their experiences are fashioned on his pattern. The first *taken away* is plural, expressing a general truth; the second is singular, applying it to each individual case. The inner reality of their death is that it is neither simply the inevitable end that comes to all the living nor is it accidental or untimely. It is, rather a deliberate ‘taking away’ in order to be spared from evil/‘from the face of calamity’, i.e. ‘from coming calamity’ ([1 Cor. 10:13](#); cf. [2 Ki. 22:20](#)).

[2](#) On the order of the lines in this verse see the translation above and read the NIV in the order bca. On *peace* see [53:5](#). Such is the portion of the Lord’s loved ones in death: *they find rest as they lie in death*/‘they rest in their beds’. The bodies of our loved ones lying at rest (whether on their deathbeds or in the ‘bed’ of the grave) picture to us the unbroken rest into which they have entered. Smart tellingly contrasts this with the beds of sloth on which the false leaders lie ([56:10](#), where the same verb [NIV, *dream!*] is used) and the bed of lust ([7–8](#)) of the prostitute.¹⁰ How blessed are the Lord’s people in death! Their death is purposeful ([1cef](#)) and leads to entry into peace ([2b](#)) and the experience of rest ([2c](#))! *Those who walk* is singular (see above)—‘the one who walks’. *Uprightly* (*nākōah*), ‘in his uprightness, straightforwardness’, is found only in Isaiah ([26:10](#); [30:10](#); [59:14](#)) apart from [Amos 3:10](#) and is uniformly ethical, meaning that which is ‘straight’, the life which demonstrates that a person is ‘right’ with God.

The prostitute and her family ([57:3–13d](#))

It is possible that the original poem was verses [3–11](#), with the questions in verses [4](#) and [11](#)

¹⁰ Smart, p. 241.

marking the beginning and the end, and that verses 12–13d were added to fill out the picture. The passage is redolent of the pre-exilic cults and has the vigour of a piece written against them when they were in full operation and threat.

The prostitute's family (57:3–5)

This poem on the prostitute's brood is in two equal stanzas. Each begins with a description of parentage (3ab, 4de) and continues with a description of practice, in its affrontery to the Lord (4a–c) and its actual religious abominations (5).

3 *But you* emphasizes the contrast with those just described. *Sorceress* is one who had opened herself to the 'control' of a spirit or supernatural entity. *Adulterers* and *prostitutes* are both singular in the Hebrew. Adultery is the breaking of a pledge and is therefore used figuratively for renegeing on sworn loyalty to the Lord. Prostitution is entering upon an illicit relationship. Adultery therefore expresses the principle (unfaithfulness to the covenant); prostitution the practice (devotion to lovers other than the Lord). The adulterer gives his love elsewhere; the prostitute takes other lovers.¹¹

4 This verse points in turn to the careless laugh, the scornful sneer and the dismissive rejection of the Lord. *Brood* is (lit.) 'children', 'those begotten by or born to'. *Rebels*/‘rebellion’ always denotes deliberate wilfulness (*cf.* 53:5). *Liars*/‘a/the lie’ is the actual false thing (rather than the principle or idea of falsehood).

5 We have here two aspects of Canaanite cults. First, the fertility cult, associated with the evergreen tree as a symbol of life and expressed in orgiastic rites. Secondly, there is the cult of Molech with its demand for human sacrifice. There may be a deliberate contrast here between cults of life (fertility) and cults of death (human sacrifice) as summarizing the total range of hateful affronts to the Lord. To the Canaanite mind, sexual acts performed in the sanctuary were directed to Baal in the hope of reminding him of his work of fertilizing humans, animals and land and stimulating him to function. But to the Bible such practices were not 'hallowed' by being 'religious'. They were 'lust' (*cf.* Nu. 25:1ff.), the satisfaction and excitement of the worshipper replacing the will and glory

¹¹ The figurative use of 'harlotry' occurs about forty-three times in the Old Testament. The most extended developments are in Ezk. 16 and 23, and the deepest probing of the theme in Hosea. The other occurrences in Isaiah are 1:21 and 23:15–17. There is no reference to the charge of harlotry being levelled against the post-exilic people.

of God in worship. On sacrifice to Molech see [2 Kings 23:10](#); [Jeremiah 32:35](#). The offering of the children was, presumably, a propitiation of the god of the underworld, a charm against death. To Isaiah, however, it is not sanctified by being ‘religious’; it is merely (lit.) ‘slaughter/butchering children in the ravines’, treating them like cattle in a market. *Oaks* (*'ēlîm*) means ‘big trees’ rather than any special tree ([1:29](#) is the only other place where this tree is mentioned in the context of religious abomination). The *spreading tree* as a religious site is wholly pre-exilic ([Dt. 12:2](#); [1 Ki. 14:23](#); [Je. 2:20](#)). The precise words *overhanging crags* are found only in [2:21](#) (cf. [Jdg. 15:8, 11](#)).

The prostitute’s ways (57:6–13d)

The alteration to second person singular feminine marks the move from the children to their mother. The intention is to analyse what Hosea calls the ‘spirit of prostitution’ ([Ho. 4:12](#); [5:4](#)) as it infects and affects people. The poem has a manic quality, reflecting the picture of a people driven as by an inward demon, now here, now there, to achieve a security which was readily available in the Lord, but they would not have it. We follow them down into the valley ([6](#)) pursuing false gods, up to the mountain ([7](#)) in a frenzy of ‘sexual’ defection and deep to Sheol ([9](#)) ready for any abasement if only the great ones of the earth will offer them a secure alliance.

6 Religious defection ([6a–d](#)) brings with it the certainty of divine retribution ([6e](#)), a thought which forms an inclusio when Isaiah returns to it in verses [12–13d](#). *The idols* is an NIV interpretative addition to (lit.) ‘Among the smooth stones [*hēleq*] of the valley is your portion’. The meaning of *hēleq* is uncertain. Young notes a possible Ugaritic justification for ‘the dead [gods]’,¹² but it is more usual to think of stones worn by water erosion into shapes suggestive of a resident ‘god’. It would not have escaped Isaiah that the word *hēleq* also means ‘slippery’, and it would be beyond him to resist such a neat ‘dig’ at the stupidity and the deceitfulness of false religion at one stroke! Also the word has an assonance with *your portion* (*beḥallēqe nahal helqēk*). But the ‘portion’ of Israel was the Lord ([Pss. 16:5](#); [119:57](#)). What perversion to change the great, divine *hēleq* for a *ḥālāq*, life for a stone, truth for a slippery deceiver! *They are your lot* (*gōrāl*; cf. [Pr. 1:14](#)) is ‘throw in your lot with them’, ‘take your chance with them’. Turning from the Lord to the gods was rejecting certainty for chanciness. The rhetorical question *Should I relent?* shows

¹² Young, pp. 402–403.

that the Lord's mind is made up, and rightly so. The inevitable outcome is reserved to the end ([12–13d](#)).

7–8 From the valley bottoms ([6](#)) to the *high and lofty hill*, the spirit of prostitution fills the land. The *bed* on the hill indicates blatant, publicized prostitution. The metaphor is to be taken seriously. There is no such thing as toying with false gods; it is as serious and ‘involving’ as sharing the same bed. *Behind your doors and your doorposts you have put your pagan symbols* (all the nouns are singular in the Hebrew) is a phrase where certainty eludes and only suggestions can be made. ‘Symbol’ (*zikkārōn*) is from the verb ‘to remember’ and occurs with a possessive pronoun (as here) only in [Job 13:12](#), where it means ‘what you call to mind’, *i.e.* ‘your memories’. But why should memories be (lit.) ‘behind the door’ (unless this is idiomatic for ‘out of sight, out of mind’ and therefore equivalent to *neither remembered me* in verse [11c](#))? *zikkārōn* is possibly related to *zākār* ('male') and is a phallic symbol. But then, all the more, why ‘behind the door’? It could be that we are to understand *zikkārōn* absolutely as ‘things that remind’. The NIV has pursued this road interpretatively with the translation *your pagan symbols*, presumably intending a concealed paganism coupled with a professed Yahwism. But Isaiah seems to go out of his way in this passage to describe blatant apostasy (a bed on a hill-top!). It is therefore more likely that ‘your reminders’ refers to the writing of the Lord’s words on the doorposts ([Dt. 6:9](#))—indeed the reference here to the ‘doorpost’ cannot but point in this direction. Such writing was intended as a public statement that this household lives by the word of the Lord. The prostitute, however, has put her testimony out of sight (not erasing it but concealing it), keeping a foot in both camps, preserving a form of commitment but making sure no-one knows about it. This is a perfect exposure of the sin of compromise. *Forsaking me* is a reasonable development of (lit.) ‘from with me’, *i.e.* ‘from being in my company’. *Uncovered your bed* means bringing out of the privacy of the bedroom into public view; *climbed into it* means made yourself available; *opened it wide/‘made wide’* means made it large enough for all comers. *Made a pact with those* is ‘you made a covenant for you from them’, *i.e.* in your own favour at their expense.¹³ Recalling that the covenant was the heart of the relationship with the Lord, the idea of covenant-making deliberately underlines the idea of apostasy and compromise. The people’s conduct struck at the very heart of divine grace and graciousness.

¹³ On *kārat l^e* ('to make a covenant in favour of/to the advantage of ...') see [55:3](#).

Whose beds you love shows that financial advantage was only part of the motive; deeper lay a heart's desire for the life of sin. *Looked on their nakedness* is (lit.) 'you saw a hand'. The assumption behind the NIV is that 'hand' is euphemistic for phallus, but there is no example (or suggestion) of this in the Old Testament. 'Hand' could be metaphorical for personal power or resources, *i.e.* before the prostitute accepted a client she prudently appraised (not his sexual prowess but) his bank balance. This would match the reference to 'making a pact'. Or again in [1 Samuel 15:12](#) and [2 Samuel 18:18](#) 'hand' means 'monument' or 'memorial' and therefore a possibility of enduring name and fame. Hence here, 'You had visions of lasting stability/enduring fame'. This would fit in with the development in verse [9](#) and also suit the moods of the kings who pursued alliances with the super-powers of their day (*e.g.* Hezekiah's lunatic delusions in relation to Merodach-Baladan; [39:1ff.](#)).

9–10 Isaiah customarily explains his metaphors (*e.g.* [7:17](#), [20](#); [8:7](#)), so here he adds the reality corresponding to the story of the prostitute. Those who misunderstand what he is doing change the text to read *you went to Molech* (*mōlek*) instead of 'you went to the king' (*melek*). The change keeps the text in touch with the religious element in verses [6–7](#), but from some point in verse [8](#) (certainly from *pact*/‘covenant’ onwards) the other side of the metaphor comes to the fore: Israel's prostitution of herself in order to secure the military 'clout' of the great powers on her side. [Ezekiel 16](#) and [23](#) exemplify these two sides of the 'prostitute' metaphor. If we fail to retain 'king' here, there is no background for *ambassadors*—unless we think of a literal attempt to journey to the underworld of Sheol (not *the grave*)! But the background to this reference is chapters [7](#) and [28–35](#), the periods of the disastrous flirtings with Assyria and Egypt respectively. In [28:14–15](#) Isaiah used the Sheol metaphor to expose the politicians who came back waving their piece of paper and crowing about 'peace in our time'—they had only signed the national death-warrant! It is the same here. This is not an attempt to enrol the assistance of supernatural powers but a straight reminder that when the people of God seek strength and security in and through the world all they achieve is death. *You went* ($\sqrt{\text{šûr}}$; [Song 4:8](#)) means 'to descend from'. 'You went down to the king' perfectly touches off such a debasing and servile exercise as we see in Ahaz ([2 Ki. 16:7](#)). On *wearied cf.* [30:1–7](#); [Jeremiah 2:25](#); [18:12](#). *By all your ways* is better 'by the abundance of your ways/journeys', referring to ambassadors going hither and yon and sparing no effort to

secure support (cf. the same words in [Jos. 9:13](#)). *Found renewal of your strength*/‘the life of your hand’ is an unparalleled and vivid phrase. If ‘hand’ is taken as ‘personal action’, then we have ‘you found energy for what you wanted to do’; if it is taken as ‘resources’, then ‘you found the means to achieve your end’. Either way it speaks of determination to pursue the chosen course, dredging up strength for yet another effort, finding resources in the national exchequer for yet another political throw.

11 Before he rounds off the poem by returning to the thought of divine retribution (see verse [6](#)), Isaiah exposes the groundlessness of unbelief (*Whom have you so dreaded and feared?*), its sinfulness (*you have been false to me*), its inexcusableness (*neither remembered me*, i.e. all the greatness of the Lord and his former acts) and its insultingness (*nor pondered this in your hearts*/‘gave [me] a thought’—whereas in every situation of life he should be our first thought and our priority port of call!). On only four of its sixteen occurrences does *silent* ($\sqrt{hāšâ}$) refer to silence from speech. Its majority meaning requires or implies inactivity. Over what period can it truly be said that the Lord seemed inactive while his people pursued other gods and flirted with political alliances? The exile is excluded because it was itself a divine action against these very sins—never again could the people say the Lord had done nothing! Again, neither in the exile nor in the post-exilic period were these sins in evidence to invite action. But during the pre-exilic period the people could look back on long tenure of their possessions and shrug off prophetic warnings ([5:12–19](#); [28:9–10](#); cf. the misinterpretation of the Lord’s silence in [Ps. 50:21](#)). Possibly we have here an example of Isaiah’s preaching during the long dark days of Manasseh.

12 *Your righteousness and your works* is what you are and what you are doing. *They will not benefit you* is the same verb as [30:5ff](#).

13 *When you cry out for help* is the first hint of the coming judgment that is so central to these final chapters of Isaiah. When that time comes they will ‘shriek’ but *your collection (of idols)* is an explanatory addition will be exposed as helpless (cf. [2:20](#); [31:7](#)). In contrast to the Lord, committed to ‘collecting’ ($\sqrt{qābaṣ}$) a world-wide people to himself ([56:8](#)), the prostitute-driven people have collected ($\sqrt{qābaṣ}$) false gods. Substantial they may seem but a *wind*, a *mere breath*, a ‘whiff’ is enough to *blow them away!*

Trust and inheritance and the homeward road ([57:13e–14](#))

These are transition verses (see the outline above).

13e–g This verse looks back. As we have seen, there were those who sought to make their life in the Lord's land prosperous through the fertility cults, and their tenure of it secure through political and military alliances. This, however, is not the Lord's way of inheritance. They will be blown away by the wind of judgment, but the one *who makes me his refuge will inherit the land*. This speaks a word of assurance to the oppressed people of verses 1–2, saying their present experience belies their future. It is faith (taking refuge) that brings salvation. *The land* speaks of tenure, security and provision; *my holy mountain*, of acceptance in the Lord's presence and enjoyment of his company. But 13e–g also looks forward, for without a reference to those who will inherit the land there is no background to verse 14's call to prepare the way for their journey home.

14 This verse links with 13e–g and forms a bridge between the two halves of the whole oracle. *And it will be said* is 'and he/one will say'. There is an air of mystery and solemnity about this which we must simply leave as it is. We are not told who the speaker is, the Lord himself or a prophetic messenger (cf. 40:6). But whereas in 40:3 the 'way' was that by which the Lord would come to shepherd his people home, here it is the uncluttered way by which they travel (cf. 35:1–10). It is a built-up road, a causeway, therefore it cannot be missed; it is free of *obstacles* so that there will be no stumbling or accident. But who are these implied travellers? By raising this question verse 14 prepares for verses 15ff., and verse 15 with its initial *For* begins the reply.

The Lord and his household (57:15–19)

A Introduction. The speaker: the exalted, eternal and holy God (15ab)

B The household the Lord desires and renews (15c–f)

C The creation of the Lord's family (16–19)

C¹ By divine restraint (16)

C² By exchanging smiting for healing (17–18a)

C³ By a total divine provision (18b–19)

Following the two-line introduction, the poem consists of four four-line stanzas. B and C¹ share references to the human *spirit*; C¹ and C² share the verb 'to be angry' (NIV, *angry, enraged, anger*); C² and C³ share the topic of going along the way (17c) and being led (18b) and the verb 'to heal'.

15 The Lord speaks first of himself and then of his dwelling-place, the household he wishes and the new life he bestows on the members of his family. *High and lofty* (*rām*

w^eniśśā') is the same as 6:1; 52:13. *High* is what the Lord is in himself—transcendent; *lofty*/‘upraised’ is what he is in relation to all else—over all. The old and emotive translation ‘who inhabits eternity’ (NIV, *who lives for ever*) does not accord with the use of the noun ‘*ad*’ (‘eternity’).¹⁴ A literal translation is ‘a dwelling—one of eternity’/‘eternally dwelling’, hence, as the NIV, the everlasting God.

The heart of the divine nature, the reality which gives him his *name*, is his perfection and moral majesty.¹⁵ In *lives for ever*, the verb *live* is $\sqrt{\text{šākan}}$. It is used of the Lord’s coming to ‘dwell’ among his people (e.g. Ex. 25:8; 29:45) and is about to be used here of his taking a family to dwell with him. His dwelling matches his nature, for he lives in ‘the high and holy’ (*place* is a necessary addition). When, therefore, the poem goes on to speak of others being taken as the family of God to share his dwelling, it is clear that this is not done by any reduction of the standards or the dignity of God, nor through any adjustment or compromise of his nature. Somehow there are those who are brought to share his holiness. On *but also with him cf. 33:5, 16. Contrite*/‘crushed’ is used in 53:5, 10 of the Servant ‘crushed’ by suffering. Here it refers to those crushed by life’s burdens and batterings, a reference to the sufferings of the righteous in verse 1. *Lowly* ($\sqrt{\text{šāpēl}}$, ‘to be low’) is one of the many Hebrew ethical terms which start from a physical or secular base. The humble are those who know their rightful place is at the bottom, but the Lord does not purpose to leave people as he finds them. Within his household reinvigoration is designed to remedy the trials and inequalities of this life; hence *to revive* is ‘to give life to’ those whom life has humbled and crushed. Though in general usage there is much overlap between the psychological terms *spirit* and *heart*, when used together *spirit* is the ability to enter into life with vigour and enterprise, and *heart* is the contemplative side of life, the realm of reflection and appreciation.

16 The initial ‘For’ of this verse (omitted by the NIV) makes it an explanation of verse

¹⁴ ‘*ad*’ (‘eternity’) is used once as a noun (Jb. 20:4); three times in the formula ‘for ever and ever’ (Ex. 15:18; 1 Ch. 28:9; Ps. 9:18<19>); four times (including the present) in the formula ‘of eternity’ (Is. 9:6<5>; 45:17; Hab. 3:6).

¹⁵ The usual formula for ‘naming’ is ‘and his name is ...’ (e.g. 1 Sa. 1:1; 17:4). Where the Lord is involved, the divine name usually precedes, ‘and Yahweh is his name’ (e.g. 47:4; 48:2; 51:15). This suggests that in the present case (*whose name is holy*), ‘holy’ (like ‘jealous’ in Ex. 34:14) is not a description of God’s name but what he is called, i.e. ‘whose name is “Holy”’.

[15](#), just as verse [15](#) is of verse [14](#). How will the Lord acquire such people to share his holy dwelling? First, by an unexplained restraint within his own nature, a refusal to visit his anger to its full extent. *Accuse* is ‘to enter into legal proceedings against’, and *be angry* implies that there is that which lawfully excites divine opposition and wrath. But were the appropriate judgment to be passed, people’s vital powers (*spirit*) and their hold on life itself (*breath*) would collapse. For ‘spirit’ and ‘life’/‘breath’ together see [42:5](#); for ‘breath’ as tenuous human life see [2:22](#). *The breath of man* is ‘and the breaths I have myself made’. The plural ‘breaths’ probably refers to ‘breathing things’, actual living beings in their frail existence. The emphatic pronoun *I*, ‘I myself’ as it were, poses the divine problem: he himself chose to make, can he therefore, without further ado, destroy?

[17](#) The history of humankind before God has not eased the divine dilemma. *Sinful greed* is ‘the iniquity of his wrongful gain’. ‘Iniquity’ is deviation from the norm, the contradiction of the law of God in human life. On ‘wrongful gain’ (*besa’*) see [56:11e](#). Here it means the unscrupulous pursuit of self-interest. On the side of God, this produced anger (*I was enraged* refers to the nature of God offended and roused), active opposition (*I punished/smote*) and withdrawal of divine fellowship and favour (*hid my face*). But none of this effected a change in sinful man who *kept on in his wilful ways*/‘went on backsliding in the way of his heart’, *i.e.* went on living according to his own nature (‘heart’), with a life-style (‘way’) that led him further and further (‘backsliding’) from God.

[18a](#) Suddenly all is different; a new edict goes out from the Lord. Not because man has changed (*his ways still go on*), not because the Lord has decided to overlook sin (*I have seen*), but for a reason undeclared, something that is true in the heart of God and true to the nature of God, ‘smiting’ has turned to ‘healing’. For this coincidence of ideas see [19:22](#), and for a similar unexplained change from wrath to salvation see [12:1](#). The solution to the human plight springs from the Lord.

[18b–19](#) This final stanza ends with a reference to ‘healing’, which forms a link with the preceding stanza. We may understand it as a summary statement, *i.e.* the conjunction used to introduce an explanation: ‘In a word, I will heal him’. Such a complete healing of poor sin-sick humanity involves first, redirection of life (*I will guide him*) by which the backsliding sinner ([17c](#)) is divinely set on a new course. Secondly, a complete

experience of comfort (*I will ... restore comfort to him*/‘I will make comfort complete for him’). The sinner has known crushing and humiliation (15d–f); now all the miseries of being in sin and of suffering sin’s adversities will be exchanged for a full comfort.

19 Thirdly, the Lord will create *praise on the lips of the mourners in Israel*. The NIV has done large-scale interpretative work here. A literal translation of the Hebrew is, ‘I will make comfort complete for him and for his mourners, creating the fruit of the lips’ or ‘I will make comfort complete for him, that is, for his mourners, creating the fruit of the lips’. The reference, therefore, is not to the voice of *praise* but to whatever it is right for ‘mourners’ to say. What Isaiah expresses poetically is the fundamental truth that without repentance there is no entering into the comforts of salvation, and only God can sovereignly create the ability to repent. On *creating* ($\sqrt{bārā}$) see 1:5. There is nothing in the whole of salvation that is not God’s sole, creative work, not even the words of sorrow by which the penitent (cf. 1:27) comes home. The final aspect of the healing of humanity is the experience of true and unbroken peace on a world-wide scale. The repetition *Peace, peace* is the Hebrew idiom for what is superlative in kind and total in extent, the truest peace and peace to the exclusion of all else.¹⁶ *Far and near* means everywhere and refers to the world-wide offer and experience of the work of God in salvation. In this last stanza (see the outline above), as throughout verses 15–17, the references remain to the singular ‘him’ (the NIV is wrong and misleading to offer *them* in verse 19c; see the beginning of this note on verses 18b–19). Salvation is individually targeted and individually embraced.

Peace: the impossibility of peace for the wicked (57:20–21)

This final section of the whole poem ends with a palistrophe on ‘the wicked’, just as it opened with a palistrophe on ‘the righteous’ (1). It is best to give both words their forensic significance, i.e. those who are declared guiltless and those who are declared guilty before the bar of divine justice. In *like the tossing sea* the participle is passive, hence ‘the disturbed sea’, subject to forces which make it turbulent, restless and unsettled. These forces, however, are not external, they are the forces of its own nature. *Which cannot*

¹⁶ On repetition as an idiom see 6:3. Cf. Gn. 14:10, where ‘pits, pits’ means ‘full of pits/covered with pits/all pits’; Dt. 16:20, where ‘righteousness righteousness’ means ‘only/the exactest righteousness’; and 2 Ki. 25:15, where ‘gold gold’ means ‘pure gold’.

rest/‘for it cannot rest’ is very emphatic, ‘for to be quiet, it is not able’. *Cast up* is the active of the verb *√gāraš* meaning ‘to disturb, stir up’; all the muck is driven out into the open (*cf. Mk. 7:20–23*). This is a picture of the state of the wicked, but the grimmer reality is that by divine word (*says my God*) the wicked do not have *peace*. This great inclusio word (see verse 2) looks beyond this world to the next, away from humankind to God. *The wicked* do not have *peace* with God nor enter into *peace* at death.

c. Sin exposed and confessed (58:1–59:13)

See the main outline (p. 461), where this section corresponds to A² and C¹, and also the outline on p. 463 and the general remarks in each place.

58:1–14 is a call to the people of God to recognize their sin and rebellion; 59:1–13 shows that there are those who have received and can exercise the divinely created gift of repentance of which 57:18b–19 spoke.

A critique of religion (58:1–14)

The exposing word of God (1) comes to people who are very religious (2) but find no satisfaction in their religion (3). Somehow, God is not responding to them. Put bluntly, however, the religion which is exposed here rests on Canaanite rather than Yahwistic principles. The essence of Canaanite religion was to put the gods under pressure to perform their functions (hence, for example, what we would call orgiastic rites designed to stimulate Baal to acts of fertility). This is the spirit which verse 3 reveals. They act *as if they were a nation that does what is right* (2c), but the motive is to pressure the Lord into response, and hence the dismay (3) that so much afflictive piety has attracted no divine attention! The essence of Israelite religion, however, is response. Not doing things to influence the Lord but doing them to obey him; not works looking for reward but faith acting in obedience. For this reason, Isaiah counterpoises the desperate fasting of verses 2–3 with the joyful keeping of the Sabbath in verses 13–14. For in every sense the Sabbath brings us to the heart of the matter. It is a real test of ‘heart’-religion to give a whole day to God and to do it with delight. The Sabbath is, first, a call to consecrate life’s timetable to God, to adopt a style for six days which allows the seventh day to be a day apart (Ex. 16:22–30; Nu. 15:32–36). But verses 13–14 go beyond getting the timetable right; they are dominated by the word *delight* (13c, 14a). The heart is so captivated by God that the day set apart is a joy. This is the reason for the Sabbath emphasis in chapters 56–66; it is the symbol of a whole life and heart devoted to the Lord.

Theologically and practically, chapter 58 belongs with 1:10–20. The two passages are the same in content, emphasis and movement. In both, it is the unholy alliance between religious punctilio and personal shortcoming that is condemned and, in particular, the assumption that it is possible to be truly religious and socially indifferent. Smart puts it exactly: ‘One of the unique features of the Biblical faith is that there is no genuine relation with God that is not at the same time a relation with the brother.’¹⁷

A¹ The voice of rebuke (1)

B¹ A fast without a blessing: the false exposed, the afflictive emphasis (2–5)

C Contrast: the Lord’s chosen fast and its blessings (6–12)

a¹ Social emphases (6–7)

b¹ Personal and spiritual rewards (8–9b)

a² Social emphases (9c–10b)

b² Personal and spiritual rewards (10c–12)

B² A feast with a blessing: the true commended, the joy emphasis (13–14a)

A² The voice of promise (14b–d)

The distribution of words throughout the poem supports this analysis. The contrasting voices (A¹, A²) both refer to ‘Jacob’, the former exposing the sin of the house of Jacob, the latter promising the inheritance of all that was promised to Jacob. B¹ and B² use the $\sqrt{hāpēš}$ group of words in the same sense as ‘self-pleasing’ (2af, 3c, 13bf). The contrast between them is supported, on the one hand, by the fasting (3a, 4ac, 5a) and humiliation emphasis (3c, 5b) and, on the other, by the Sabbath (13ac) and delight emphasis (13c, 14a). In the central C section, a¹ and a² both refer to the *yoke* (6ce, 9c), use the verb $\sqrt{sālah}$ (‘to send’; 6d set; 9d pointing) and refer to feeding the *hungry* (7a, 10a); and both b¹ and b² refer to *light* (8a, 10c) and use the divine name Yahweh (8d, 9a, 11a).

The voice of rebuke (58:1)

The purpose of the poem is to produce a conviction of sin. According to 57:19, repentance is a creative work of the Lord, but the proclamation of his word is the means he uses to create penitents (whom we shall meet in 59:1–13). *Shout it aloud/Cry out/Proclaim with the throat* is a unique expression emphasizing the real and true use of the

¹⁷ Smart, p. 247.

human voice, just as verse 14d will stress that the resulting proclamation is the *mouth of the LORD*. The trumpet (*šôpâr*) was prominent in the Sinai narrative (Ex. 19:16, 19; 20:18). The prophetic voice here is the voice of the law, purposing to expose *rebellion* (*peša'*; 53:5, 8) and *sins* (*hatṭô'ôt*, actual or specific shortcomings; 6:7; 53:12).

A fast without blessing: the false exposed (58:2–5)

By the initial *For* (an explanatory conjunction) we are alerted to the fact that though people's religious practice appears sound (2a–f), there is that about it which, properly evaluated, is really the rebellion and sin with which verse 1 charges them. Therefore, the renderings *seem eager* (2bf) and *as if* (2c), though not literal, are correct interpretations. What the first stanza (2) thus hints at, the second (3a–4b) develops by exposing the motivation of their fasting (3a–d), the way they use the fast day (3ef) and its outcome (4ab). The final stanza (4c–5) rejects such fasting as spiritually fruitless (4cd) and, because it is only an outward show (5a–d), unacceptable to the Lord (5ef). The three stanzas are, respectively, of six, six and eight lines.

2 Their religious practice seemed praiseworthy. It was assiduous (*day after day*), committed (*seek*; cf. 31:1; 55:6; 65:10) and devoted (*me holds the emphatic position—‘It is me they seek’*). The verb *seem* ($\sqrt{hāpēš}$; cf. the noun *hēpēš* in verses 3e, 13cf) does not itself cast any doubt on their spiritual reality; it simply says that they ‘wish’ or ‘are pleased to’ (cf. 53:10). To all appearance their delight is a model which all true religion should reproduce, for they wish to *know* (2b), to do (2c), to persevere without compromise (2d), to learn (2e) and to practise the presence of God (2f). *Commands/judgments*’ are what the Lord as their king ‘judges’ to be right for them in any given situation. *Just decisions/judgments of righteousness*’ are decisions regarding earthly behaviour which reflect heavenly principles of right. *They seem eager for God to come near to them/delight in the nearness of God*’ refers to the use of the ordinances whereby they ‘come near’ ($\sqrt{qārēb}$; cf. its use in Lv. 1:2) to him, or his resultant nearness to them.

3 What seems to be the product of ‘delight’ (2bf) is actually a calculated policy aimed at producing a heavenly reaction (3a–d). The only fast commanded by law was the Day of Atonement (Lv. 23:26–32), which was a ‘holy convocation’, a time of self-abasement, free of work, a ‘Sabbath of solemn rest’ (*šabbat-šabbâtôn*). But plainly more is involved in the questions asked here. Doubtless in the formalistic religious atmosphere indicated in 1:10ff. there was much of the Pharisaic spirit of Luke 18:12¹⁸ in which the element of