PARALLEL GUIDE 27
Isaiah of Jerusalem

Summary: The ninth century BCE saw several civilizations achieve literary distinction, not least of all Israel in her great literary prophets, especially Isaiah of Jerusalem. This chapter sets Isaiah in his historical and cultural context with brief looks at Amos, Hosea, and Micah. Next it reviews selected portions from the so-called I Isaiah, with special attention to the famous passages expressing Israel's messianic hope.

Learning Objectives

• Identify the Syro-Ephraimitic War

• State which chapters belong to I Isaiah ("Isaiah of Jerusalem") and which are attributed to II and III Isaiah

• Cite two processes that are likely to occur when an oral tradition is reduced to a written record

• State a comparison that Isaiah made between his own experience at the time of his call and the experience that he foresaw would happen to Judah

• Identify three examples of Isaiah's use of imagery that contain a double interpretation

• State the meaning of the "sign of Immanuel"

• Cite the passage in which Isaiah describes the "Messianic King"

Assignments to Deepen Your Understanding

l. Read Isaiah 6:1-8 and note your thoughts and emotions. Take a few deep breaths. Let yourself relax, dwelling in silence. Stay quiet for a few moments. When you are ready, read the passage over slowly, line by line, phrase by phrase. Read it once, then return to the silence with your eyes closed. After a few moments, read the passage again and return to the silence. Repeat the cycle a third time.

2. The Songs of Isaiah are very well known in the Christian tradition because of the identification with the Messiah. How has this been used in Christian iconography and music? Find some examples.

Preparing for Your Seminar

Choose one of the "Songs of Isaiah" to use during your seminar's worship time. Perhaps you may wish to listen to some portions of G. F. Handel's oratorio "Messiah" as part of your worship.

Additional Sources

Christopher R. Seitz, *Isaiah 1-39*, Interpretation Series (Louisville: John Knox, 1993).

Page 452 left blank

Chapter 27
ISAIAH OF JERUSALEM

Amos and Hosea prophesied in the northern kingdom of Israel; somewhat later in the same century, Isaiah and Micah were called to speak the word of YHWH to Judah, the southern kingdom. Four prophets denounce the moral decay of the kingdoms, the oppression of the poor, and the arrogance of the wealthy. All announce the judgment that is to come from YHWH, and—with the probable exception of Amos—all express some form of hope for the future. Within this broad area of agreement, however, there are significant differences. Isaiah presents a theologically bold picture of future hope—a picture which has influenced most Jewish and Christian thought ever since. Micah's views concerning the central historical issue of the fate of Jerusalem and his general theological orientation are quite different from those of Isaiah—Micah prophesies the city's fall.

Together these great prophets present us with a rich tapestry portraying one of the most creative ages of human history. The ninth century BCE was an age in which several civilizations achieved literary greatness: in Greece, Homer produced the Iliad and the Odyssey; the Hindu Vedas had been completed, and the Brahmanas, cultic works based on the earlier mythological Vedas, were beginning to be written in India; both the J and the E writers had completed their works in Israel. But in none of these cultures except Israel would there be anything comparable to the work of the eighth-century prophets. One may well marvel at the artistry, the literary skill, and the human sensitivity of the epic writers of Greece and India. In neither of these cultures were there created works demonstrating both a totality of vision, and an ability to focus that vision on specific historical issues, as the four books of Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, and Micah.

In order to place the two Judaean prophets Isaiah and Micah into their historical context, we refer to II Kings 15:1-20:19. Please read this historical material. (The material in II Kings 18:13-20:19 is duplicated almost exactly in Isaiah 36-39.) In the Book of Isaiah, read also chapters 1-12, 20, and 28-32.

The Historical Background according to II Kings

At the start of the eighth century, Azariah, also called Uzziah, is king in Judah, and Jeroboam II is king in Israel. In both kingdoms this is a time of prosperity. Jeroboam II would reign for forty-one years and Uzziah (Azariah) for fifty-two. Although the Deuteronomist gives Uzziah high marks as a king, the fact that he did not remove the shrines at the "high places" stands against him. This seems to be at the heart of the Deuteronomist's assumption that the king's leprosy caused a general uncleanness over all the realm. This notion is to have an effect on Isaiah's sense of vocation. Uzziah's son, Jotham, apparently acted as regent for his father long before succeeding to the throne itself, while the king lived in the seclusion the law required for lepers. In spite of Uzziah's sickness, however, the continuity of government in Judah through the century stands out in sharp contrast to the rapid succession of kings in Israel. The Davidic dynasty in Judah remained more stable than the loose confederate system of the north.

In Israel two kings—Zechariah and Shallum—are assassinated (II Kings 15:8-14) and within seven months of the death of Jeroboam II, Menahem becomes king. He reigns for ten years, part of the time as a vassal of the king of the greatly expanding empire of Assyria. Tiglath-pileser III—called Pul in II Kings 15:19—had invaded the northern areas of Israel, and he will withdraw his armies only after Menahem agrees to pay a large sum in tribute money. Menahem is succeeded by his son, Pekahiah (II Kings 15:23), whose reign lasts only two years. One of Pekahiah's captains, Pekah, kills him and takes the throne (II Kings 15:25). Pekah manages to hold the throne for several years, but eventually is assassinated by Hoshea, who is destined to be the last king of Israel (II Kings 15:30).

In Judah, Jotham officially becomes king during the second year of Pekah of Israel's reign. Israel and Syria, dissatisfied with the role of puppet kingdoms, band together to try to throw off the Assyrian yoke. They want Judah to join them, but for the moment she is sufficiently remote from the scene of battle not to want to become involved. Mountainous Judah enjoyed a relative seclusion that was not available to Israel, situated on

the main trade route between Mesopotamia and the coastal plain of Palestine.

While Pekah is still king of Israel, Jotham is succeeded in Judah by his son, Ahaz. In an attempt to force Judah into becoming an ally by replacing Ahaz with a king of their own choosing, Pekah of Israel and Rezin, king of Syria, attack Judah. The warfare and the siege of Jerusalem with which it would reach a climax are usually referred to as the Syro-Ephraimitic War—the war between Judah and the allies, Syria and Ephraim (Israel). This war, and specifically the siege of Jerusalem, provides the occasion for a major group of oracles by Isaiah (Isa. 7:1-9:7).

Against Isaiah's advice, Ahaz appeals to Assyria for assistance against the Syro-Ephraimitic alliance. Assyria is more than willing to give assistance—indeed, as Isaiah probably suspected, she would certainly have moved against Israel and Syria even if Ahaz had not requested it. At any rate, the revolt is put down, Rezin of Syria is killed, and the people of Damascus, capital of Syria, are taken into exile (II Kings 16:7-9). Ahaz, now a vassal of Assyria, goes to Damascus to meet with Tiglath-pileser III. Possibly as a sign of his willingness to conform to the desires of his overlord, Ahaz has an altar duplicating an Assyrian design he saw at Damascus made for the Jerusalem temple. The Deuteronomist shows that he is displeased with this king, even accusing him of offering his son as a human burnt-sacrifice (II Kings 16:3).

At this time, Isaiah, his advice rejected by Ahaz, withdraws from public acts and nurtures a group of disciples, writing down the oracles which he had spoken to Ahaz until some future time when his message might fall upon more willing ears (Isa. 8:16ff.)

In the northern kingdom, Hoshea has put an end to Pekah's reign and taken his place as king of Israel. Tiglath-pileser III is succeeded by Shalmaneser, and Hoshea takes advantage of the transition period to make a new attempt to throw off the Assyrian yoke. At first, Hoshea pays tribute money to Shalmaneser, but it soon becomes known

to the Assyrian king that Hoshea is moving toward an alliance with Egypt, a nation beginning to reassert herself after a long period of internal weakness. Shalmaneser sweeps down upon Israel, besieges Samaria, its capital, for three years, and finally, in 721 BCE, puts an end to Israel as a separate nation forever (II Kings 17:1-6). In later times "the Samaritans" became a symbol to Jews of all that is vile, polluted, and contemptible. The thrust and the sting of Jesus' parable of "the Good Samaritan" is the image of a person of Samaria being better than the priests and the Levites of Judah. Second Kings 17:24-41 gives the background of the Jewish hatred of Samaritans. According to the account, the Assyrians sent in an assorted group of subject peoples to replace the deported Israelites, many of whom, for their part, were resettled in other occupied territories. This much of the story is confirmed by extrabiblical records. The newly arrived foreigners—assuming, as did all peoples of that time, that the god of the land must be worshiped along with the gods they have brought with them—request that an Israelite priest be assigned to them to teach them how to worship YHWH. This is done, and a combined Yahwist and heathen cultus results. Many of the forms of Yahwism are followed, but the "mongrelized" people cannot keep "the statutes and the ordinances and the law and the commandment" (II Kings 17:37). These "Samaritans" are then neither Israelites nor pagans, but a disreputable mixture of the two, and "to this day their children and their children's children continue to do as their ancestors did" (II Kings 17:41).

Three years before the downfall of Israel, Hezekiah succeeds his father, Ahaz, as king of Judah. Perhaps motivated by the fate of Israel—or even affected by the messages of Isaiah and Micah—Hezekiah begins a series of religious reforms that will earn for him the praise of the Deuteronomist. He not only conducts himself properly in regard to the Jerusalem cultus, but also has the high places torn down and the Canaanite fertility symbols—the Asherah and the pillars—destroyed. Not content with that, he breaks in pieces the bronze serpent which had been kept in the Jerusalem temple from ancient times (II Kings 18:1-4).

This bronze serpent was supposedly the one which Moses made in order to cure the Israelites who were bitten by the "fiery serpents" in the wilderness (Numbers 21:6-9), but it is much more likely that the figure was a Canaanite fertility symbol left over from the time of the Jebusites, before Jerusalem became David's royal city. If it was retained from a previous association with the Baal cult, its destruction by the reforming King Hezekiah is much more understandable than would be the case if it were a relic of the time of Moses. That it had a name—Nehushtan—also suggests that it was an image of a god.

This religious reform may have pleased the Deuteronomist, but Shalmaneser's successor, Sennacherib, apparently suspects that it means that the king of Judah is beginning to feel more independent than Assyria intends. Sennacherib sends certain officials of his court to Jerusalem. With the Assyrian armies, led by Sennacherib himself, only a short distance away, the Assyrian officials shout to the Judaeans a taunting demand to surrender the city. A pleasant and comfortable exile is promised if they surrender without resistance. Isaiah had advised Hezekiah's father, Ahaz, not to enter into an alliance with Assyria. But now he advises Hezekiah against seeking

to overthrow the power of Assyria by appealing to Egypt. The Assyrian officials, no doubt without knowing they are agreeing with the prophet, also caution that Egypt is a "broken reed" (II Kings 18:21) which can provide no reliable support. In a state of panic, Hezekiah calls upon Isaiah to prophesy again. Isaiah assures the king that YHWH will protect Jerusalem and that the Assyrians will depart without victory (II Kings 19:32-34). For some reason—either a plague which runs through the troops (II Kings 19:35: "the angel of the LORD") or news of a conspiracy at home on the part of his two sons—Sennacherib withdraws and returns to Nineveh, where he is assassinated. Esarhaddon, a son who did not take part in the conspiracy, succeeds him, but Judah is momentarily forgotten under the weight of more pressing problems facing the new king at home.

Signs of things to come may be seen in the visit to Hezekiah of messengers from the king of Babylon, the kingdom to the south of Assyria. Newly stirring to aggression, Babylon soon overcomes the mighty but somewhat disorganized Assyrian empire. According to the present text, Isaiah predicts that Babylon will invade Judah and carry it away into captivity. This is certainly a later insertion, however, if Isaiah indeed did warn that the rescue of Jerusalem was only temporary. He probably expected the return of the Assyrians, not the coming of the Babylonians (II Kings 20:12-19). The death of Hezekiah is duly recorded (II Kings 20:21), but no note is taken of the death of Isaiah. His message remains, and the historical context is in many instances clear, but the man himself must be seen largely through his words.

Isaiah of Jerusalem

In its present form the Book of Isaiah contains sixty-six chapters. It was noticed as early as the eighteenth century (by Johann Eichhorn) that the material in chapters 40-66 could not have been written in the eighth century BCE, the time of the prophet Isaiah. The Exile in Babylon is the obvious context for these later chapters—at least of 40-55; chapters 56-66 could well be placed even later, after the Exile ended. At any rate, Eichhorn believed that he could see two different literary works even within the later section of the book. He gave the name "the Second Isaiah" to chapters 40-55, and "the Third Isaiah" to chapters 56-66. This division has been generally accepted by Old Testament scholars, though some continue to argue that the entire latter part of Isaiah—chapters 40-66—is a single work. Still, references to "I Isaiah"—or "Isaiah of Jerusalem," to identify the man—"II Isaiah," and "III Isaiah" are to be found in most textbooks. Our concern in this chapter is only "I Isaiah," the pre-exilic writings of Isaiah of Jerusalem, found in chapters 1-39.

Even within these first thirty-nine chapters, moreover, passages can be found that were probably not spoken by Isaiah himself—passages that make reference to events which were later than the time of the prophet. The composite nature of the book illustrates one important feature of prophetic utterance: it was rarely, if ever,

written. A prophet spoke the message to particular people on specific occasions. The message was usually in poetic form, a form that lends itself to memorization. Only later would the prophet, or more usually a group of the prophet's disciples, write down the separate oracles to preserve them. Isaiah 8:16ff. specifically refers

to this practice: "Bind up the testimony, seal the teaching among my disciples." The "testimony"—the oracles which Isaiah spoke to Ahaz, but which Ahaz did not heed—are to be bound up in a scroll to be read at a later time when they might be understood and heeded.

Whenever sayings that have been spoken over a fairly long period of time and have become part of an oral tradition are gathered together to be committed to writing, two things are likely to take place. First, the sayings are likely to have become separated from their original historical settings. The separate sayings are remembered, but it is difficult to remember precisely when and in what order or to whom they were said. Lacking a chronological context, the sayings are then grouped according to their content—or sometimes according to a key word which they share. Second, a saying which was made by a disciple of the prophet—perhaps during a discussion among the disciples in which the thoughts of the prophet were being explored—may become associated with the prophet's own utterances. Within the prophetic circle—prophet and disciples—it was always the message itself that was of concern, not the precise person who said it.top

The material in Isa. 1-39 is not arranged chronologically, nor is it all from the mouth of Isaiah himself. The purpose of writing the book was to preserve Isaiah's message, not to present a chronological diary of his work, nor to record his—and only his—words. This same phenomenon can be seen in the New Testament gospels.

Stories about Jesus and accounts of events in his life, and sayings uttered at various times during his ministry, were told in oral form for many years before the gospels were written. The gospels were later attempts to present the message—the "good news"—which disciples had discovered in the life and ministry of Jesus. Except in the broadest outline they do not give us a biography of Jesus, nor can we always be sure that it is his own words we are reading. In the case of the gospels, as in the case of Isaiah, we can be certain only that the texts show us the impression which the central figure made on his disciples.

The thirty-nine chapters of "Isaiah of Jerusalem" fall into three major divisions, each of which probably occupied one scroll. The first major division is chapters 1-12; the second, chapters 13-23, and the third, chapters 28-31. Passages almost certainly added later include the following:

chapters 24-27—an "apocalyptic" section probably added much later. (An "apocalypse" is a literary form that reveals things which happen in "the last days," the days of the coming of YHWH or of his Messiah.)

chapters 34-36—additions to the last major section. There is some debate as to which chapters belong to the major section and which to the addition. chapters 36-39—a duplication of the Deuteronomic history found in II Kings 18:13-20:19.

We concentrate our attention on the first and third major sections. There is no particular reason to study passages in the precise order in which they appear. Instead we attempt, when possible, to put them into a chronological order. Please read each passage as we turn to it.

Sections Within the First Scroll

Chapters 1-5 contain oracles most likely delivered in the early years of Isaiah's ministry. Chapter 1 serves as introduction, both to this section and to the book as a whole. It expresses the main features of the prophet's message, whether originally spoken by him or written by a disciple. Chapter 2:2-4 is identical to Micah 4:1-3. It is not clear whether one of these prophets borrowed from the other or—more probably—that there was a common source used by the compilers of both books.

Chapter 6 is an account of Isaiah's call to become a prophet. One would expect it to come first in the book, but it is placed at the beginning of a series of oracles to King Ahaz uttered during the time of the Syro-Ephraimitic War—probably to claim the greatest possible authority for the truth of the oracles.

Chapters 7-9:7 are the oracles to Ahaz.

Chapters 9:8-11:16 contain oracles that state the overarching motifs of judgment and redemption which characterize Isaiah's thought.

Chapter 12 contains two songs that form a closing appendix to the first scroll.

Isaiah 6:1-8 The Vision in the Temple

"In the year that King Uzziah died . . ."—that is, in 742 BCE—Isaiah began a ministry that was to last at least forty years. The long period of stability and prosperity that had prevailed in both Israel and Judah was drawing to a close. Even though Uzziah had contracted leprosy and had not been visible to his people for many years, his reign had been one of peace and comfort. Perhaps Isaiah saw in the passing of this king the passing of an era. Events in Israel—underscored by Amos and Hosea— could well have suggested to a person of insight that Judah's relatively happy state could not last.

The account of Isaiah's call, however, does not deal with such internal motivations. Isaiah remembers his call as an event of total ecstasy, a vision of God himself. The scene of the vision is the innermost sanctuary of the Jerusalem temple: the small windowless room in which two large cherubim stood with their wings stretched over the ark, on which YHWH sat invisibly enthroned. This inner chamber, the "holy of holies," was never visited by the common worshipers. If Isaiah was actually in the sanctuary at the time of the vision, it would strongly suggest that he was a priest. It is possible, of course, that the vision did not occur there, but that the imagery in which it was couched was drawn from descriptions of the room which could have been known by anyone. If Isaiah were not a priest, he was at least someone of influence within the court, based on his intimate awareness of the affairs of the palace and his ready access to the king.

Religious symbolism, in Judah as well as in other ancient cultures, depict the inner sanctuary of the temple as an earthly representation of the heavenly throne of God. In Isaiah's vision, the symbol becomes reality: in place of the ark is the actual throne of YHWH, "high and lofty," and in place of the wooden cherubim are the heavenly seraphim. "Seraphim" and "cherubim" are different Hebrew words, the first meaning "burning" and the second, "those held fast." The "fiery serpents" which plagued the Israelites in the wilderness (Numbers 21:6ff.) were also called "seraphim." Isaiah's description of them is essentially the same as descriptions of "cherubim" elsewhere.

The seraphim are attendants to YHWH. Their six wings symbolize the attitude of divine attendants: out of reverence, the face is covered; out of modesty, the genitals are hidden (as we have noted, "feet" is often used as a euphemism for genitals). Readiness for service is expressed by the two wings with which each creature flies. The "thrice-holy song"—"holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts"—expresses clearly and unmistakably the idea that YHWH is a universal deity: "the whole earth is full of his glory" (Isa. 6:3). Amos had more than hinted at this when he associated YHWH's actions with the events in other nations, but in Isaiah it is a full-

blown conviction. Monotheism, in all but an open use of the word, is clear in Isaiah.

Isaiah is struck with terror by the vision. Verse 5, in which Isaiah wails in fright, may be intended for more literal interpretation than it sometimes receives. The prophet says that he is “a man of unclean lips” and that he dwells “among a people of unclean lips.” The leprosy of the king—who has just died—may be alluded to here as having covered the entire realm with uncleanness. In contrast with the unclean King Ahaz, Isaiah has seen the King—YHWH of hosts! The contrast between the holiness and purity of YHWH and the lowliness and impurity of his people will become a motif to which Isaiah returns again and again. To the traditional belief that to see YHWH was to die—human beings cannot survive such awesome holiness—is added for Isaiah the abysmal feeling of utter uncleanness from association with a disease-stricken realm.

Isaiah identifies himself completely with the people. He is not a pure vessel, selected to convey the words of YHWH because of his virtue relative to the people; he is one of them—unclean with a disease for which the Law requires that the mouth be covered (Lev. 13:45). Far from being fit to prophesy, Isaiah finds his own lips loathsomely unfit. He is cleansed by a coal from the fire on the altar (vv. 6-7). The horrible pain of the fire is required to purify Isaiah; in the same way—as Isaiah will tirelessly preach—Judah must undergo pain for her purification.

Although cleansed, Isaiah is not overcome by the spirit of YHWH as the other prophets have been. On the contrary, the initiative for his ministry is left to him. YHWH, speaking with the heavenly court, asks whom God should send, and Isaiah gives the traditional response of the person of faith,
“Here am I! Send me!” (v. 8)

Chapter 27 Isaiah 6:9-13 Oracles of Blindness and Destruction

The following two statements from YHWH (vv. 9-10 and 11-13) show the tension under which Isaiah must struggle—a tension we saw also in Hosea. On the one hand, the people are unredeemable owing to their blindness and lack of understanding of the ways of YHWH. This fact is so undeniable that the oracle has YHWH decree that they “keep listening, but do not comprehend; keep looking, but do not understand” (v. 9). On the other hand, the prophet cannot stand the thought that all is hopeless for Judah. He asks desperately, “How long, O LORD?” (v. 11) The answer is terrifying, but it contains within itself an implication of redemption: until such devastation has occurred, all that remains will be a stump, like the stump of a tree which has been felled (vv. 11-13). Isaiah often, as here, uses imagery that is capable of a double interpretation: if only a stump will be left, it is true that a stump will be left. As new shoots can grow from the stump of a tree that has been felled, so—perhaps—a new beginning may be possible for Judah. The last sentence of v. 13—probably a scribal gloss interpreting the prophet’s words—correctly expresses the message, clearly stated in many of the prophet’s oracles, that a “remnant” of Judah shall be saved.top

Isaiah 1:1-9 The Sin of Judah

We might have begun our consideration with 1:1, for it is a title for the entire book. The title dates Isaiah’s work as spanning the reigns of four kings, but since his call did not come until the death of Uzziah, it is obviously an error to include that king in the list.

Rebellion is a key term in Isaiah’s thinking about the sin of Judah. “I have reared children and brought them up, but they have rebelled against me” (v. 2). Even dumb animals know their master—the one who cares for them—but Judah does not have as much understanding as an ox or an ass (v. 3). Indeed, the evildoers have so completely rejected YHWH—as their corruption shows—that they are now “utterly estranged” (v. 4). The Hebrew word translated “Ah” carries more meaning than this translation suggests. It might be better to translate the opening of v. 4, “Shame on you, sinful nation!”

Judah's rebelliousness seems to be beyond correction: though continuously smitten, she will not learn (v. 5a). Judah is sick throughout—the description in vv. 5b-6 is suggestive of the leprosy with which the king was afflicted. Defeat and devastation by war have left the land desolate, and Judah stands out amid the desolation like the crude, flimsy shelters in vineyards and fields from which field hands watch for animal and human marauders at harvest time (vv. 7-8). All that is left are a few survivors. As in the case of the stump mentioned in the call vision (6:13), reference to survivors here has two possible significances: the pitiable remains show Judah almost as desolate as Sodom or as Gomorrah, but not quite—there are "a few survivors" (v. 9).

Isaiah 1:10-20 Empty Religion

In these verses Isaiah condemns Judah's cultic practices in words as strong as Amos uttered against Israel. But even more clearly than with Amos, the condemnation is not against the sacrificial system as such. It is inconceivable that the person for whom the temple held the place of esteem which Isaiah's call vision demonstrates should despise the very activities for which the temple was built. It is not the offering of sacrifices or the observing of the liturgical calendar of new moons and feasts that is rejected. It is doing all this with hands that are bloodstained (v. 15).

Verses 16-17 have a harsh and brisk rhythm in Hebrew. They give the basic marching orders for Judah, if she is to turn again to YHWH and have her worship conform to YHWH's expectations:

> Wash yourselves
> Make yourselves clean
> Remove the evil . . .
> Learn to do good
> Seek justice
> Rescue the oppressed
> Defend the orphan
> Plead for the widow

Verse 18 can be translated in two ways, and either translation would fit within the total pattern of Isaiah's thought. The translation of the OAB and that of most versions—has the passage promise forgiveness like that which Isaiah received through the purging of his lips by the burning coal: "Though your sins are like scarlet,/ they shall be like snow;/ though they are red like crimson,/ they shall become like wool." But it could also be translated, "If your sins are like scarlet, shall they be as white as snow?" etc. In either case vv. 19-20 state the conditions for forgiveness: willingness and obedience. If refusal and rebellion characterize Judah, she will be devoured. Since refusal and rebellion are Judah's characteristics as Isaiah sees her, it is tempting to translate v. 18 in the less optimistic way. How can her scarlet sins be made white, if she refuses to follow the only course that would lead to forgiveness?

Isaiah 1:21-31 The Fate of Jerusalem

The picture these verses present of the devastating punishment which will strike Jerusalem is important for an understanding of Isaiah's attitude toward the city. In 31:5, Isaiah predicts that YHWH will protect Jerusalem so that it will not fall when Sennacherib attacks it. Indeed Isaiah shows at many points that his thought lies completely within the orbit of the "royal theology" that had characterized Jerusalem circles since the time of David. Jerusalem is "holy Zion," the place of YHWH's abode, and the house of David is related to YHWH by an "everlasting covenant."

It has sometimes been held that Isaiah was never able to bring himself to accept the possibility that Jerusalem

itself might fall to foreign invaders. At two separate times Isaiah did, in fact, predict that threatened invasions would come to nought. This passage, however, shows that Isaiah did not expect YHWH's concern for Jerusalem to result in the city's immunity from judgment, for the city is corrupt—its failure in justice, with everyone open to bribery and the rights of the poor trampled, is but one failure in righteousness. The fire which burned the prophet's own lips will also fall upon the city of David. But—for Isaiah, for Jerusalem, and for all Judah—the terrible suffering of punishment is inflicted in order to purify and ultimately to redeem.

Isaiah 2:2-4 The Ultimate Destiny of Jerusalem

This passage, which is duplicated exactly in Micah 4:1-3, resembles Isaiah in tone, whether or not the prophet actually spoke the words. The vision is of "the latter days," that is, the final time when YHWH comes to the people in the fulfillment of all God's works. The universalism of the vision is characteristic of Isaiah—"all the nations" shall come to Jerusalem to be instructed in the ways of YHWH. The Law—the "teaching," or Torah, not simply the legal codes, but all instruction in the way of YHWH, all leading in God's paths—will "go forth" from Jerusalem to all the nations. This state of affairs, the final fulfillment of all God's work, will be a time of lasting peace. All the weapons of war will be transformed into implements of agriculture.

This wonderful picture, so often longed for by war-weary peoples, is to be the work of YHWH. The vision of Isaiah—if it is his—should not be interpreted as picturing a Jerusalem which has gradually achieved a status of universal respect and stable international relations. It is not a peace imposed on the world by the ascendancy of Judah among the world powers that is imagined. These are not the "latter days" of Jerusalem, as if she brought them in by her own power, but the "latter days" of YHWH. These days would come only after almost unendurable suffering and would be enjoyed only by the few who remain as the "stump," the "survivors" of a devastation like that of Sodom and Gomorrah.

Nor should the beautiful picture of a world at peace be interpreted as an eighth-century BCE version of pacifism. Isaiah, like any sensitive person, no doubt longed for peace and hated war. But war was never regarded by people of Old Testament times as the worst of evils. Indeed, it was often seen as the will of YHWH. Joel 3:10, written probably during the fourth century BCE, uses precisely the same words as those found in Isaiah and Micah, but reverses them: "Beat your plowshares into swords, and your pruning hooks into spears" for "the latter days" are to come. For Joel, when that time came, the time would come also for YHWH's people to fight once more, in a "holy war" in which YHWH would show "that I the LORD your God, dwell in Zion, my holy mountain" (Joel 3:17).

Isaiah 5:1-7 The "Song of the Vineyard"

Chapters 3 and 4 contain further pronouncements of the judgment and the redemption of Judah. The judgment is similar in tone to that announced in the oracles of Amos, filled with concern for the oppression of the poor and defenseless and for the prevailing lack of just leadership.

Chapter 5 presents us with a literary form of which Jesus was later to make much use: the parable. A parable is an indirect way of communicating a teaching. It resembles a lengthy metaphor—a figure of speech in which one thing is spoken of as though it were something else. It also resembles an allegory, a narrative in which the agents, the action, and sometimes the setting not only make sense in themselves but also signify another correlated structure of ideas. A parable has a bite to it. It conveys a message which is unexpected by its audience, one that is sometimes so at odds with popular expectations as to be almost unintelligible to its hearers.

Here, Isaiah starts to sing a song, perhaps during the celebration of the harvest of the vineyards. It begins on

an appealing note—the care which the prophet's "beloved" had bestowed on a vineyard. It moves on to sing of the disappointment of the "beloved" over the yield of the grapes, for they were wild grapes, showing none of the richness and bouquet that should have come from the care and attention that had been heaped on them. The destruction of the vineyard would be understandable to all who grew grapes.

Then comes the "bite" of the parable: Judah is the vineyard, and YHWH, the "beloved." The shock to the hearers must have been comparable to that which Amos produced when he spoke the last of his oracles of doom, the one that found Israel herself the target. The climax of the parable comes in v. 7. In Hebrew, the accusation is made especially graphic by a play on words: "he expected justice (mishpat), but

saw, bloodshed (mispah); righteousness (zedaqah), but heard, a cry (ze'aqah)!"

Oracles During the Syro-Ephraimitic War

Isaiah 6:1-9:7 form a unit often referred to as "The Book of the Testimony." The title is derived from Isaiah's instructions in 8:16ff. to "bind up the testimony, seal the teaching among my disciples." The "Book" probably has the Syro-Ephraimitic War as its background. Isaiah spoke prophecies to Ahaz, giving him advice in regard to the advancing armies of Syria and Israel. When his advice was not taken, the "Book" was composed and Isaiah and his disciples remained silent until the next crisis—the Assyrian threat during the reign of Hezekiah.

Remember that chapter 6 contains Isaiah's call. As we have said, it was probably placed here to authenticate the oracles that follow.

Isaiah 7:1-9 Advice to Ahaz

Ahaz is terrified at the approach of the Syrian and Israelite armies. Isaiah is commanded by YHWH to take his son Shear-jashub and meet with Ahaz to give him an oracle. Isaiah's message to Ahaz is to be quiet and not to fear, for YHWH has promised, "It [the plan of Pekah and Rezin] shall not stand, and it shall not come to pass" (7:7). Isaiah advises "quietness" to Ahaz, and he will give the same advice to Hezekiah many years later as the Assyrians threaten Jerusalem. The quietness that Isaiah urges is not simple passivity, but calm assurance based on trust in YHWH. Isaiah is convinced that YHWH controls history. The plots of people and nations cannot succeed against YHWH's purposes.

Although the passage in Isaiah does not say so, we know from II Kings 16:7ff. that Ahaz appealed to the Assyrian king Tiglath-pileser for help against Syria and Israel. Isaiah's advice is probably intended to urge Ahaz not to do so—to trust in YHWH, not in alliances with seemingly powerful empires. "Quietness" and complete trust in YHWH will suffice to keep Jerusalem safe—and nothing else will.

It is also important to note that the assurance Isaiah offers to Ahaz is conditional: YHWH will protect Jerusalem, but only if Ahaz trusts in God. "If you will not believe, surely you shall not be established" (7:9). There is a play on words in this verse: "If you do not stand firm in faith (tha'aminu), you shall not stand at all (the'amenu)." The root for both these words is amen, "truly," or "I believe or concur"—the word we have come to use to affirm the content of a prayer.

Finally, note that the name of Isaiah's son, like those of the children of Hosea, is significant. It means "a remnant shall return." Again the double-edged symbolism so frequent in Isaiah is apparent. The boy, with his symbolic name, is part of a message of encouragement in this passage, but the same Hebrew words are used in 10:21 to warn that only a remnant shall return from the terrible punishment that YHWH will inflict on Judah through the might of the Assyrians.

Isaiah 7:10-8:22 Judgment on Ahaz: the Sign of Immanuel

Through Isaiah YHWH speaks to Ahaz charging him to "ask a sign of the LORD your God. . . ." The "sign" would not need to be a spectacular event, overwhelming in its effects. It could be any action or event on the visible plane indicating that YHWH was, indeed, present and paying heed. Ahaz resorts to what was probably even then a popular saying—it eventually appears in Deuteronomy 6:16, as "Do not put that LORD

your God to the test, as you tested him at Massah." But Ahaz's piety is misinformed or, perhaps, even deliberately distorted, for what the saying forbids is an indication of distrust in God. Isaiah is asking Ahaz to demonstrate enough trust in YHWH to respond to the offer of a sign. Whatever Ahaz's wish in the matter—whether he can trust or not—the sign will be announced. We find it in vv. 14-17, one of the most discussed passages in the Old Testament: the sign of Immanuel.

Among the problems associated with any interpretation of this passage is the use to which it has been put by Christian interpreters from a very early period of Christian history. The Septuagint translation of v. 14 has the Greek word parthenos, "virgin," for the Hebrew almah. The Hebrew word means "young woman," possibly a virgin but not necessarily so. The Hebrew word for "virgin" is bethulah. The LXX translates both as parthenos. There is no basis in the text of Isaiah 7:14 for thinking that the sign was a "virgin birth." Whatever one may think of the birth of Jesus, the Isaiah text—given its language and its context—cannot be taken as predicting the birth of a child from a virgin.

"A young woman shall conceive and bear a son." The translation could also be "A young woman is with child and shall bear a son." The only difference would be the length of time Isaiah expects to pass before the child is born. The name of the child will be immanu-el, "El is with us." The name does not mean that the child himself will be God, with us. What it does mean is that his name will be a sign that God is with us, as Shear-jashub's name is a sign that "a remnant shall return."

When the child "knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good"— when he has come of age—"he shall eat curds and honey" (v. 15). In v. 22, it is said further that "everyone that is left in the land shall eat curds and honey." Some scholars have taken this to be a symbol of abundance, a variant of the "milk and honey" with which the land of promise flowed. The much more probable interpretation of both verses is that, as v. 17 suggests and vv. 18-20 state, the punishment which will come to Judah will be so extreme that the people who remain will have to survive on the milk from the few animals that are left and the honey that can be scraped from the hives of wild bees. Verse 22 might mean then that there would be so few people left that this would be an abundant food supply.

This sign—that within the early years of a child about to be conceived or about to be born such a desolation will occur—must be a sign of judgment upon Ahaz for his refusal to believe in YHWH. The agent of the destruction is to be Assyria, the "razor" (v. 20) with which YHWH will shave away the hair of the head, the beard, even the pubic region ("the feet"). Isaiah is warning that the very nation with whom Ahaz is contemplating an alliance will be the one that brings about the destruction of Jerusalem.top

Many scholars have speculated about the identity of the mother and of the son in the Immanuel passage. Some have connected the son with Hezekiah; that would make the "young woman" Ahaz's wife. Some support is given to this interpretation by the fact that the Hebrew says "the young woman," not "a young woman" as the

English text of RSV has it. This might imply that the "young woman" is one well known to Ahaz. Certainly the sign would have closer impact on the king if this were true than if the woman were nameless and unknown. There is no way of resolving this question with certainty. What is certain is that the passage, in spite of Christian interpretation, is not a "messianic" prophecy. The child is simply a sign that will vindicate the prophet's message—that God is with the people, though for judgment rather than for salvation.

In chapter 8, Isaiah carries his message to the people. In two acts Isaiah accomplishes another sign to validate his prophecy. First he writes on a tablet words that mean "the spoil speeds, the prey hastes." He has these words "notarized" by two persons. Then he "went to the prophetess"—that is, his wife—and he fathers a son. When the son is born, Isaiah names him with the Hebrew words he had written on the tablet—maher-shalalhash-baz, "the spoil speeds, the prey hastes." As Shear-jashub—"a remnant shall return"—was a walking sign of the double-edged prophecy of the remnant, so this boy is to be a constant sign of the coming destruction of Israel and Syria: "Before the child knows how to call 'My father' or 'My mother,' the wealth of Damascus and the spoil of Samaria will be carried away by the king of Assyria" (8:4). Judah will also be destroyed. The lifegiving waters that come via the aqueduct (Shiloah) from pools near Jerusalem could be trusted to support the city during the siege that Israel and Syria are laying upon it. YHWH would see to it. But Judah has not trusted YHWH in "quietness" and has reacted out of fear of her human enemies. Therefore more destructive waters will come, these from "the River," the Euphrates region: Assyria will overflow Judah. All of this will be because God is with us—"Immanuel" (vv. 6-8).top

To all this, Judah is deaf, and so Isaiah binds up the testimony—he writes it all down and retreats to his disciples (8:16-22). People will consult wizards and mediums, but there shall be no more word from YHWH. All they will find is "distress and darkness, the gloom of anguish; and they will be thrust into thick darkness" (v. 22).

Isaiah 9:1-7 A Promise for Judah

Destruction cannot be for Isaiah the final word. Destruction is punishment from the hand of YHWH, but it is intended as a means of purification for salvation. "In the former time"—that is, for Isaiah, the present or the near future in which the punishment is to occur—destruction comes, as it had already come to the northern areas of Galilee. In "the latter time"—the time when YHWH will come to fulfill his purposes—this same land will be made glorious (9:1).

Verses 2-7, which amplify this promise of eventual salvation, are among the most famous of Old Testament passages. Though it speaks of things still to come, the message is put in the past tense. This is an instance of what has come to be called "the prophetic perfect tense." The prophet's vision is so intense that it appears as though a future event has already happened, and the prophet describes it as completed action. YHWH has taken the burden and the yoke from the suffering people. The light has shone on them, so that their darkness is dispelled (9:2-5).

The event with which YHWH vindicates the people is the gift of a son—"For a child has been born for us, a son given to us" (v. 6). This child, unlike the one who was to be born of the "young woman" (7:14), is a messianic figure. He is the ideal king, the one who shall rule upon "the throne of David and his kingdom [Judah]. He will establish it and uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time onward and forevermore" (9:7). But, even if this passage has a messianic reference, caution should be used by Christian interpreters here also. Isaiah's reference may be to a child who has already been born at the time he speaks—perhaps, for example, to Hezekiah, the king who in the early years of his reign would carry out sweeping reforms in Jerusalem. Or Isaiah may mean that the child is to be born in the near future. It is also possible that he refers to a more distant hope—one which Christians could see as coming to fulfillment in Jesus of

Nazareth. There is no way to tell, but it is important to reaffirm that Isaiah, as were all the prophets, was concerned with the events of his own time and place.

Nonetheless, this is a first expression of messianic hope. In the face of the sure destruction that the prophet sees coming upon Judah, he maintains faith that YHWH will uphold the "everlasting covenant" that was made with David. There will be a king—an "anointed one"—who will reign in the house of David as YHWH intended. And with his coming, YHWH's righteousness and justice will prevail in the land. That is the messianic vision. It will be expanded and altered in details by future prophets, but its major features can be seen in this oracle.

The name that the new king will bear—"Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace"—has been interpreted by people who see in this king the Christian Savior as referring to Jesus, the "God made flesh," the incarnation of the Second Person of the Triune God. The notion that the Messiah would be God is contrary to all Old Testament notions, including those of Isaiah. What we have before us—in what we find difficult to read as other than a series of titles—is a lengthy name of many parts. And most probably the name is a sign for God's new activity in Judah, as the names of Hosea's and Isaiah's children are. The name of the future king represents a new relationship between God and Judah, in which God will prove himself these things: "Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God [protector], Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace."

Isaiah 9:8-10:4 Four Oracles Against Israel and Judah

There is no way to date these oracles within Isaiah's career. The first three of them describe dire punishment for Israel. Isaiah has no real interest in the northern kingdom—indeed, it may already have fallen—but the desolation which is Israel's lot is used to remind Judah of the consequences of rejecting YHWH's righteousness. The fourth oracle, though it names no kingdom, appears to be addressed to Isaiah's listeners—it is in the future tense, predicting a fate similar to that of Israel. Each oracle ends with the refrain—reminiscent of Amos—"For all this his anger is not turned away; his hand is stretched out still" (9:12, 17, 21, and 10:4). Isaiah 5:24b-25 has the same refrain and is usually thought to have been a part of the series. The insertion of the "Book of the Testimony" seems to have interrupted what once was a series of five oracles.

Isaiah 10:5-19 "Assyria, the Rod of My Anger"

Isaiah's interpretation of YHWH as the Lord of all the earth (6:3) is prominent in this passage. YHWH is Lord over Assyria, even if Assyria does not know it. Its king may believe that the might of Assyria rests on his own power—note how often the first person pronoun appears in 10:12-24, where the king speaks (in "haughty pride"). But whatever the king of Assyria may think, it is actually the strength of YHWH that gives victory. God is using Assyria, a nation Judah would have called "godless," to punish those who are truly a "godless nation" (v. 6)—Judah itself, "the people of my wrath."

Many—if not most—of the oracles in the second scroll of chapters 13-23 must have been composed much later than Isaiah of Jerusalem. They are primarily oracles against foreign nations, and most of them hold little interest for us today. We do not examine this section, therefore, except for 20:1-6. In these verses Isaiah refers to an alliance King Hezekiah was tempted to make with the Philistines and Egypt. It was similar to an alliance a decade later which provided the occasion for some of Isaiah's most important oracles.

Chapters 24-27, sometimes called "the Isaiah Apocalypse," are made up of separate oracles by an unknown prophet or prophets of the post-exilic period. They describe events that will occur when YHWH comes in judgment at the end of history, but they do not show the often fanciful symbolism that would be developed in a later style. For the moment, we omit these chapters also.

The Philistine city-state of Ashdod, encouraged by the new dynasty in Egypt, has attempted an unsuccessful revolt against Assyrian domination. Judah apparently considered joining the revolt, but decided not to do so. In 711 BCE, three years after the beginning of the revolt, the Assyrians crush the Philistine city.

Isaiah 20:1-6 An Enacted Prophecy

We have discussed the propensity of the prophets to "speak" in signs as well as in words. This is a good example of such a sign act. The enacted prophecy—Isaiah walking about the city of Jerusalem naked and barefoot—seems to have begun at the outset of the revolt in order to persuade Hezekiah against joining it. Verse 1 states that YHWH's instructions to Isaiah to perform this symbolic act were given "in the year that the commander in chief . . . came to Ashdod and fought against it and took it," but v. 3 indicates that Isaiah had been carrying out his visible protest for the preceding three years. The approach of "the commander in chief" of the Assyrian force to administer the final blow to Ashdod seems to have been the occasion for Isaiah to put into words the meaning of his symbolic act: a rebellion against Assyria which depends on Egyptian assistance is doomed to failure (vv. 3-5).

Sargon, the Assyrian king who crushed the revolt of Ashdod, died in 705 BCE. The period of transition in which the new king, Sennacherib, took over the reins of power was used by Babylon, the rising power to the south of Assyria in the Mesopotamian basin, to stir up rebellions among the small nations—such as Judah—previously under Assyrian control.

Isaiah 30:1-7 A Second Temptation to Seek Help from Egypt

At this point Hezekiah has sent ambassadors to Egypt, hoping to gain support against Assyrian moves to put down the Babylonian-inspired series of revolts. And in 30:1-5, Isaiah states his opposition to this policy. The proposed alliance with Egypt is wrong, in Isaiah's view, not simply because it may be politically and militarily unwise—the experience of the Philistines with the unreliability of Egyptian support would demonstrate this—but because it is a policy which leaves YHWH out of the picture. Isaiah's conviction that YHWH is not only Judah's only hope, but also her sufficient hope, has not changed since he advised Ahaz against defending Jerusalem against the Syro-Ephraimitic alliance by making a pact with Assyria. Depending on foreign nations is an indication of a lack of trust in YHWH—and this is, for Isaiah, the worst possible sin.

Verses 6-7 refer to the trip made by the Judean ambassadors through the Negeb—the desert area south of Judah—to Egypt. The dangers of the trip, from the wild animals and snakes of the land, are not worth the risk, "for Egypt's help is worthless and empty" (v. 7). The last line of this verse seems to have become corrupted in the text. "Rahab who sits still" makes no sense. "Rahab" is a commonly used name for the "chaos monster" whose defeat by a god is the first stage of the creation of the world in ancient Near Eastern myths. (See Chapter Three—"The Priestly Creation Story.") As the footnote in the OAB suggests, the line originally may have said, "Rahab, who shall be destroyed." Egypt is compared to the monster, and, like the monster, she will be slain.

Isaiah 30:8-14 Another "Testimony''

As Isaiah's advice to Ahaz was rejected, so Hezekiah also ignores the prophet's warning. And once again, Isaiah commits his prophecy to writing so that future readers will be able to judge his words (v. 8). The rejection of YHWH's word given through the prophet will result in destruction like that of the collapsing of a wall or the smashing of an earthen pot (vv. 13-14).

Isaiah 30:15-18 "In Returning and Rest You Shall Be Saved"

Verse 15 sums up the heart of Isaiah's faith and his central message to Judah in the dangerous times in which he lived: YHWH alone is Judah's reason for being, and YHWH is the one in whom she should trust. Judah should turn back to YHWH from her vain attempts to save herself by foreign alliances; she should rest—not in passivity, but from her frantic and faithless attempts to shore up her position. Quiet trust in YHWH should be both the source and the evidence of her strength.

This piece of preaching is by no means a counsel for withdrawn piety—an interpretation that has often been forced on the words—but for a strong confidence that YHWH is in control of history and will carry out his purposes. Isaiah believes that Judah is the strongest nation on earth, but not in military terms, rather in terms of her role in YHWH's design of salvation-history. Even the nation's rejection of the prophet's message does not dim this belief: the defeat of Judah will not end her role in salvation-history, for God will preserve a remnant through whom ultimate victory will come. Although v. 18 is thought by many scholars to be from a pen later than Isaiah's, it expresses his thought: punishment is for the nation's purification, and mercy will follow for those who "wait for him." Those who wait for him are those who "return" and "rest" in quiet trust.

468

As Isaiah 36-39 and II Kings 18:13-20:19 point out, Jerusalem did not fall to Sennacherib during the reign of Hezekiah. Isaiah's predictions of destruction were deferred to a later time, and the destruction was to come at the hands of Babylon rather than of Assyria.

Isaiah of Jerusalem gave voice to a new orientation for the prophetic message. The future, as Hosea had hoped, would provide the promise for Judah. The faithlessness of the people of God might result in the loss of the gifts that YHWH had bestowed on his people in fulfillment of the promises to Abraham, but God would be faithful to the promise to David. Out of the debris left in the wake of Judah's faithlessness, a remnant would remain to turn in faith to YHWH, and out of that remnant an heir to the throne of David would come. In his reign would begin the era of righteousness and justice toward which salvation-history under YHWH's direction always moves.

Isaiah makes no reference to the covenant with Moses. All his attention is directed to the covenant with David. In part this is a reflection of the fact that he was a citizen of Jerusalem. Jerusalem was different from the rest of Judah—it was the royal city, the seat of the Davidic monarchy, but it had not been part of the older history of the tribes before David took it for his capital. Isaiah could not have been ignorant of the older tradition, however. It is likely that at least part of his silence about the Mosaic covenant is due to the people's false confidence in their status as the chosen people of YHWH. They had assumed too easily that YHWH, having done for them all that was promised, would not undo it in the future. Isaiah's conviction is that he would do precisely that.

Isaiah's contemporary, Micah, shows a different orientation. A country dweller for whom the city was a pit of corruption, he harks back to the traditions of the Exodus to bring judgment on Jerusalem. In the next lesson we look at this prophet, using his message to introduce the motifs of the Book of Deuteronomy and the reform under Josiah.

469

End of Chapter

Homer back

Well maybe. Not definite. See Wikipedia.

Sufficiently remote back

In mountainous territory, yes, but only about 30 miles away.

Latter days back

We could discuss this.

Advice to Ahaz back

If I were in the same position as Ahaz, I'd probably have done the same thing.

Has been interpreted back

Actually by G.F. Handel?

Quiet trust back

For the benefits and drawbacks of quiet trust see the wonderful *Foundation* trilogy, by Isaac Asimov. Many people had such trust in Hari Seldon's plan to make the future automatically come out OK, but a secret band of initiates worked tirelessly over the centuries to keep the plan on track.