

THIS IS OUR GOD: STUDIES IN THE PROPHECY OF ISAIAH

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INTRODUCTION

Isaiah and us

We do not come as strangers to the prophecy of Isaiah. It is one of the best-known and most-loved books of the Bible. Passages sung in Handel's Messiah: **40:1–5**, (the whole chapter was an early inspiration to me), **7:14, 40:9; 60:2–3; 9:2, 6; 35:56; 53:3–6, 8; 52:7**; Other passages that have been significant to me: **55; 49:5–6; 28:23–29; 62:6–7**.

Isaiah and Jesus

Apart from Isaiah being one of the most quoted books in the New Testament, there is a most significant statement in John 12:37–41. This refers not just to Isaiah's vision in ch. **6**, but to the whole book. Hence Isaiah has been called 'the Old Testament evangel (gospel or good tidings)'. Isaiah saw the glory of Christ, and spoke of him. This is why as Christians we study the book of Isaiah: that we may know Christ.

The Book of Isaiah

'The vision' **1:1**. This refers to the whole book, not just ch. 6. 'Vision' is a communication by God of His word (see 1 Samuel 3:1, Numbers 12:6–8, Exodus 33:18–34:28). Hence **1:2a, 10, 18a, 20b, 24a, 2:1**. God does not just overwhelm us with the revelation of His being and glory; He speaks to us intelligibly, and relates with us in that speaking.

8:16–22 gives us some idea of how the book came to be written and put together, among a gathering of disciples, in the context of alternative fruitless words prevailing at that time. **38:1–6** is an example of how the word of the LORD came to Isaiah at specific times. Always given by God, not dreamed up or surmised by Isaiah.

Isaiah the son of Amoz

We know nothing of Isaiah the prophet outside of the Book of Isaiah, apart from 2 Kings 19–20, which are reproduced in Isaiah 36–39, and a couple of mentions in 2 Chronicles. We get glimpses of Isaiah the person and prophet at work in **7:3–4, 8:1–4, 16–18, 20:1–6, 37:1–7, 21ff, 39:1–8**. And, of course, in **6:1–13**, which will warrant closer study. A man, with his family and group of disciples, totally committed to the ministry of the word of the LORD. Not because he had adopted it as a cause, but because that word came to him, and humbled him, and he trembled at it—**66:2**.

Assignment Question 1

Write a pen-sketch of Isaiah the person and prophet at work from the glimpses we get in his Book.

Judah and Jerusalem

1:1 A city prophet, in the royal court, contrast Amos 7:14–15, Micah 3:9–12 (Micah, with a more rustic feel, was a contemporary of Isaiah—see Micah 1:1, and compare Micah 4:1–5 with **2:1–5**—God giving the same message from both directions: city and country-side.)

The promise to Judah: Genesis 49:10. The promise of Jerusalem: Deuteronomy 12:5–7, 2 Samuel 5:6–12. The promise to David: 2 Samuel 7:8–16. Isaiah and his contemporaries were heirs to these promises of God. But God had also said 1 Kings 9:3–9. This is what Isaiah saw coming, and it was into this situation that he spoke the word that came to him and to all the people from God.

Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah

1:1. Uzziah (Azariah) 792–740 BC: 2 Kings 15:1–7, 2 Chronicles 26. See **6:1.** Jotham 750–735 BC: 2 Kings 15:32–38. Note also vv. 29–31. These (Syria/Israel and Assyria) occasioned the two great crises that confronted Judah in Isaiah's time. See also 2 Chronicles 27. Ahaz 735–715 BC: 2 Kings 16, 2 Chronicles 28. Hezekiah 715–686 BC: 2 Kings 18–20 (compare **36–39**), 2 Chronicles 29–32. Following Hezekiah came Manasseh 697–642 BC: 2 Kings 21:1–18. Note 24:1–4.

One Isaiah, or three?

Not a question we should have to answer, but one raised by critical scholarship of the Bible over the last 150 years. Wellhausen (1869) first popularised the notion that Genesis and other books of the Old Testament are compilations arising over time from different stages of Israel's history and religious development. Duhm (1892) applied this in a thorough-going way to the Book of Isaiah. Much of this was based on the nineteenth-century rationalism, still widely current, that refused to believe there could be such a thing as predictive prophecy, and a penchant for fragmenting the Scriptures on a humanistic basis rather than seeing them as a God-given whole. Scholars have noted that chapters **40–55** appear to relate to the period of the Babylonian exile 597–538 BC (Cyrus is mentioned by name in **44:28** and **45:1**—see 2 Chronicles 36:22–23), two hundred years after Isaiah the son of Amoz, and so have postulated an exilic prophet, or prophetic school, called Deutero (Second)-Isaiah, and then have attributed chapters **56–66** to a post-exilic Trito (Third)-Isaiah. This (with variations) has become almost universally accepted in most twentieth-century commentaries, and was assumed as a matter of course in my own theological training.

The question is, is it possible that Isaiah of Jerusalem could have foreseen the rise and fall of Babylon, and the exile and return of Israel? The principle in 2 Peter 1:21 would indicate that he could (compare P T Forsyth, writing in the early 1900s in ways that comport directly with the church in our own day). Especially if the prophecies of eg Deuteronomy 28:63–66 and 1 Kings 9:6–9 were extant in Isaiah's day. In my own reading I discovered chapter **13** well and truly ensconced in first Isaiah. Only to find that the commentators say this must be a later interpolation. But then there is **39:5–7**. Note Isaiah himself does not put any time on this.

Recent scholarship, under the influence of people like Brevard Childs ('canonical criticism'), is swinging back to a more holistic and integrated approach, and a healthy respect for the complete text as we have received it. Alec Motyer, in his full and reputable commentary *The*

THIS IS OUR GOD: STUDIES IN THE PROPHECY OF ISAIAH

1:1

Prophecy of Isaiah (Inter-Varsity Press, 1993), gives good grounds for seeing the whole book as the work of one author:

From the earliest extant texts of the Book of Isaiah (Qumran, 100 BC) there is no break in the text between chapters 39 and 40.

A single author is quite capable of writing in different literary styles (eg Bright Bird and Shining Sails, Angry Heart and Tranquil Mind, The Day of the Spirit, and Tall Grow the Tallow-woods—all by Geoffrey Bingham!)

Passages such as **57:3–9**; **65:2–5** refer distinctly to the pre-exilic situation—Isaiah still writing to his own day.

The landscape assumed in chapters **40–55** is still very much that of Palestine rather than Mesopotamia, eg **40:16**; **41:18–19**; **44:3, 14, 23, 49:1**; **55:12–13**.

Babylon is predicted **43:14**; **47:1**; **48:14** and **48:20** in very general terms, not according to later historical detail, and the exile and the fall of Babylon are described in pictures that do not necessarily reflect the later actual experience, eg **42:22**; **51:14**; **46:1–2**; **47:1–5**. **52:11–12** is very much from outside Babylon.

The prophecy of **39:1–8**, appearing to negate all Isaiah's previous predictions, would have *required* him to seek further outworking of God's purposes, particularly through such an atonement as we find in **52:13–53:12**.

The six main principles of chapters **1–39**:

- the LORD as the Lord of history
- supreme over idols
- the promise of a remnant
- the reconciliation of God and sinner on the basis of atonement
- the vision of the restored Zion, and
- the Davidic Messiah

remain the chief concerns developed in chapters **40–55**.

Assignment Question 2

Why do scholars say there were two or three (or more) 'Isaiahs'? What are the arguments to say there is only one?

The Messianic hope

Motyer gives his own helpful three-part analysis under this heading:

- the King (chapters **1–37**)
- the Servant (**38–55**)
- the Anointed Conqueror (**56–66**).

The message of Isaiah

Faith in God and the sureness of His promises is the central message of Isaiah's prophecy. See **28:16, 30:15**. This is not just private and personal, but national, over against political and militaristic alternatives. Ahaz refused it (**7:1–12**), and opted for alliance with, and subjugation to, the growing power of Assyria. Hezekiah heeded the message, and saw its power (chapters **36–37**), but forgot it in his foolish and prideful courting of the up-and-coming political and military power of Babylon, before the descent into the darkness of his son Manasseh's reign. Both succumbed to a 'do-it-yourself salvation' based on personal

endeavour. Faced with the apparent failure of his message in the impending doom of God's people, Isaiah was shown for the nation, as he had already discovered personally, that God Himself effects atonement even for those who have sinfully denied faith. So 'nothing shall be left' **39:6** is followed by 'comfort my people' **40:1**, and the promised return and restoration, effected through the atonement of the Servant. Even so, Isaiah foresees that the redeemed still remain morally and spiritually unchanged, and no less dependent upon faith as they wait for God to bring in full and final salvation and righteousness for the whole creation in chapters **56–66**. So the powerful theme is faith in God's grace and nothing else from beginning to end.

Assignment Question 3

How would you summarise the over-all message of Isaiah?

A PRELIMINARY TASTER—1:1–5:30

Isaiah's call comes in **6:1–13**. The first five chapters are like an author's preface, in which, using words which came to him after his call, Isaiah sets out the situation into which he was called to speak. We recall the promises made regarding Judah, Jerusalem and its king, and the actual events and attitudes of the reigns in which he prophesied. Three sections give parallel pictures:

- 1:1–31** National rebellion against God, giving rise to national calamity, religious falling away, and social collapse, with the promise of atonement.
- 2:1–4:6** A vision of Zion as the centre of God's law, of peace and of righteousness for the whole world, contrasted with its present national, religious and social disintegration.
- 5:1–31** God's full and abundant care for His vineyard Israel, and the woes that come upon injustice and disobedience.

Unnatural children—1:2–31

- 1:2–3** God's covenant with the whole creation, and His special relationship with Israel, are all of a piece. See Exodus 4:22; Hosea 11:1; Jeremiah 31:35–37; 33:19–26. So the creation is here called upon to witness against the unnaturalness of Israel's stance and behaviour.
- 4–8** The charge against Israel, and the consequences: incurable sickness, failure of care, and helplessness in the onslaught of invasion.
- 9** The survival of a remnant occurs only by God's mercy and intervention. This is God's forbearance.
- 10–17** Jerusalem in its iniquity is equated with Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 13:13, 18:21, 19:1–29), as the religious hypocrisy of Jerusalem is denounced.
- 18** Yet even within the God-given worship were elements pointing to the possibility of total transformation, if only they would receive it. God becomes especially intimate in His speaking to Israel at this point.
- 19–20** The options are made clear.
- 21–23** A lament over the condition of Jerusalem. Contrast Deuteronomy 24:17–22.
- 24** Cannot just say, 'God hates the sin but loves the sinner'.
- 25–26** Yet the judgements are cleansing judgements, leading to forgiveness, justification, and the restoration of true (Davidic?) leadership. Somewhere in

*THIS IS OUR GOD: STUDIES IN THE PROHECY OF ISAIAH***1:27–3:7**

there, not yet spelled out, is the need for a human obedient Servant and Saviour, if God's justice and righteousness are to mean anything more than divine game-playing.

- 27–28** For God's redemption is utterly consistent with His righteousness. He meets His own righteous claims, when we have failed to do so, and we respond accordingly.
- 29–30** His action exposes the shame and dryness of the false worship in which they have indulged (see 2 Kings 16:4).
- 31** Those who trust in their own works will find that these very works are their undoing.

The mountain of the LORD—2:1–4:6

- 2:1** A distillation of what was given to Isaiah to say about Judah and Jerusalem (see above on **1:1**). Jerusalem as the locational focus of the covenant (see eg Psalms 2, 87, 122) comes through strongly in Isaiah, leading to the vision of Galatians 4:26, Hebrews 11:10, 15–16, 12:22–24, Revelation 21:1–22:5.
- 2–5** Compare Micah 4:1–5. Commentators ask whether Isaiah got it from Micah, or Micah got it from Isaiah, or both got it from somewhere else. Maybe God gave it to each of them, in their differing perspectives!
- 2–3** A marvellous picture of Jerusalem and its temple as the centre of the world, to which all nations flow, from which the law and word of God goes out.
- 4** Here is the settlement of rivalries between nations, and the coming of peace (compare **9:4–7**). These words are on the United Nations building in New York.
- 5** This vision of Zion is not just some far-fetched hope, but a present reality, in that this “light of the LORD” is already present there (see Psa. 27:1; compare 1 Kings 10:23–24); hence Isaiah's ministry directed towards other nations from Jerusalem eg chapters **13–35**, and the vision of **49:6**). That present reality is being disastrously ignored by the present inhabitants, which makes the situation extremely poignant.
- 6** They have opted for false words, after the ways of the idolatrous nations, which makes them incompatible with the God who has claimed them for His own.
- 7** False dependence on wealth and military might.
- 8** Indulgence in idolatry.
- 9** These demeaning false dependencies cannot be approved or condoned by God. They can only be judged.
- 10–19** So the inevitable judgement must come. Those who know the deadly curse of pride and self-sufficiency will welcome such judgement. Note the highly poetic structure of this oracle, common in Isaiah. Sometimes the most deeply-felt prophecies come out in the most highly-structured way (eg The Lamentations of Jeremiah). Perhaps because God Himself is poetic in His being!
- 20–21** For it will mean the end of such idolatry.
- 22** But what is left for one who has faced the living and life-giving God in this way?
- 3:1–7** Detail of the judgements that actually come on Jerusalem and Judah: a frightening loss of the necessities of life, a crisis of leadership, and the breakdown of ordered relationships in society.

*THIS IS OUR GOD: STUDIES IN THE PROHECY OF ISAIAH***3:8–5:20**

- 8** All this has come about as a result of speech and conduct that defy the present ever-watching LORD.
- 9** Compare Romans 1:32: the nadir of the catalogue of evil—perverse moral insensitivity.
- 10–11** The prophet cries out to correct this gross misapprehension.
- 12–15** The LORD makes a charge in court against the people and particularly their leaders.
- 12** This is not to discredit the women and children. It highlights the failure of the men appointed to rule, and God’s judgement on them. Nevertheless, the arrogance of the women is also a contributing factor (see below v. **16–24**).
- 14–15** The male leaders are taken to task for greed and social injustice (contrast Leviticus 19:9–18, Deuteronomy 15:7–11—the barometer of covenant-keeping).
- 16–24** The women come under judgement for their self-adorned arrogance, foreshadowing invasion and the sacking of the city.
- 25–4:1** The city falls, with loss of life equivalent to six men in every seven. In a reversal of the due ordering of marriage (see Exodus 21:10), the women are left to have to fend for themselves, even while seeking to place themselves in some kind of marriage relationship to acquire a modicum of dignity.
- 4:2–6** A return to the true nature of Zion, redeemed by the LORD’s cleansing judgement (**4**), inhabited by a holy elect people (**3**), under the rule of the true Messiah (**2**, compare **11:1–3**), in terms reminiscent of Exodus 13:21–22, and anticipating Revelation 7:15–17 (**5–6**).

Assignment Question 4

In 2:1–4:6 what claims are made for Zion, and what are the implications of these claims for what is going on in Jerusalem during the time of Isaiah?

The LORD’s vineyard—5:1–30

- 5:1–7** The parable of the vineyard. Compare Psalm 80:8–19, Mark 12:1–12, John 15:1–17.
- 8–23** Six woes follow, delineating the ‘wild grapes’ of the sins of Judah:
- 8–10** Accumulation of other peoples’ property (contrast Leviticus 25:23–34) will lead to desolation and low productivity (1 bath = 6 gallons/27 litres, 1 homer = 10 ephahs).
- 11–17** Drunkenness and sensual indulgence (see Proverbs 31:4–9) bring on shallowness, deprivation, humiliation and death. God’s righteous judgement will leave only ruins, over which animals roam.
- 18–19** People come under bondage to ‘the deceitfulness of sin’ (Hebrews 3:12–13). Disregard of God gives rise to callous unbelief.
- 20** This is the ultimate hardening of perversity (compare Romans 1:32, Mark 3:22–30).

THIS IS OUR GOD: STUDIES IN THE PROHECY OF ISAIAH

5:21–6:4

- 21** This all comes from insistence on human autonomy (see Genesis 3:6, 1 John 2:16).
- 22** Thus human achievement is reduced to drunkenness and perversion of justice.
- 24–25** This moral rottenness does not leave the created order unaffected (See Leviticus 18:26–28), and natural disaster (earthquake?—see Amos 1:1, Zechariah 14:5 ‘in the days of Uzziah’) ensues, under the hand of the LORD.
- 26–30** The final grim prospect of invasion and devastation—by Assyria, Babylon, or whoever—is unrelieved by any light on the horizon, ending Isaiah’s sobering preface with a question: when God has done all, when forbearance is expended and wrath must come, is there mercy still, or has it come to an end? Is there yet any hope for God’s defiled, rebellious people?

This presentation, in chapters **1–5**, of the situation in Jerusalem and Judah, and the grievous question it poses, acts as the backdrop to Isaiah’s call and ministry, as set out in the rest of the book.

THE CALL OF ISAIAH—6:1–13

- 6:1** ‘In the year that king Uzziah died’: about 740 BC, see 2 Chronicles 26:16–23. Perhaps Uzziah’s leprous unclean state at the time of his death, as a result of his presumptuous pride, was a sign of the state of the nation (see v. **5**). What more could God have done (see **5:4**)—is there any hope?
 ‘the Lord’ is not described (see 1 Timothy 6:16); only the appurtenances of His reign and power.
 ‘high and lifted up’: used later of both the Servant (**52:13**) and the eternal God (**57:15**).
 ‘the temple’: the dwelling-place of God, and the place of sacrifice.
- 2** ‘seraphim’: angelic beings, literally ‘burning ones’—the impression their ministry (v. **6**) left on Isaiah.
 ‘six wings’: face—not to look into the hidden things of God (see Deuteronomy 29:29); feet—not to choose their own path; flew—to do God’s bidding (their ears remain uncovered to hear His word!).
- 3** ‘Holy’: brightness and separatedness—God’s ‘total and unique moral majesty’ (Motyer). God’s name is described as ‘holy’ in the Old Testament 59 times—more often than all other words put together—33 in Isaiah, 26 elsewhere. P T Forsyth:
 Do let us take the holiness of God centrally and seriously, not as an attribute isolated and magnified, but as God’s very essence and nature, changeless and inexorable...by holiness is...meant...the whole concrete righteousness of existence, self-sustained at white heat. For our God is a consuming fire...The holiness of God is a deeper revelation in the cross than his love; for it is what gives his love divine value...Even a loving God is really God not because He loves, but because He has power to subdue all things to the holiness of His love, and even sin itself to His love as redeeming grace. (*The Cruciality of the Cross*, 1910, New Creation Publications Inc. 1984, pages 205, 159, 60).
- Threefold repetition: superlative emphasis. This alone is capable of filling the whole earth, and actually does so, at all times. This is why everything happens.
- 4** Compare Psalm 114:7, Deuteronomy 4:11. Preventing visibility and access to God, on the grounds of moral incompatibility.

THIS IS OUR GOD: STUDIES IN THE PROHECY OF ISAIAH

6:5–10

- 5** ‘Woe’: ruin, and the silence of disaster and death. ‘Not the consciousness of...humanity in the presence of divine power, but the consciousness of...sin in the presence of moral purity’ (H H Rowley, *The Faith of Israel*, SCM 1956, p. 60). We are more ready to be overwhelmed by God’s power than we are willing to be shamed by God’s purity.
 ‘unclean lips’: untruth and falsehood—the root sin, compare Romans 1:18–25. Isaiah acknowledges his own personal sin in the context of the corporate sin of the nation—he is one with his people in their guilt.
 ‘the King’: never mind Uzziah, or Jotham—the LORD is the true King in Jerusalem.
- 6** ‘burning coal...from the altar’: a sign of God’s wrath, from the place of atoning sacrifice. See Leviticus 6:12–13, 17:11. God forgives sin, never by ignoring or condoning it, but only ever by judging the sinner, in the atoning sacrifice provided by Him.
- 7** This at once removes the guilt (‘the inner reality of the deviant nature’) and covers the whole cost and just requirements of the sin (‘the specific instances of shortcoming’—Motyer). By the action and word of the Lord. Isaiah can now live and speak the truth, with cleansed lips.
- 8** He is also able to hear clearly, even though the Lord is “high and lifted up”—Isaiah is made privy to the LORD’s inner counsels.
 ‘I...us’: God consulting with His royal self among His hosts. The New Testament associates this passage with the Lord Jesus (John 12:41) and with the Holy Spirit (Acts 28:25), and Christian understanding sees here a reflection of the full revelation of the thrice-holy Triune God.
 Isaiah, by his God-given cleansing, is also able to respond as a worthy emissary of the Holy God, with the message already burning within his being. If he can be forgiven and cleansed by God in this way, then there is hope for God’s unclean people, and he longs to tell them that.
- 9–10** But the message and task is the strangest one ever given to any prophet. The effect of the word will be to *close off* people’s outer and inner faculties of receptivity and understanding to the word of God, and to seal their doom. Note the emphatic pattern of v. **10** (common in Isaiah): heart, ears, eyes; eyes, ears, hearts. How can this be? Does this mean that Isaiah was to deliberately veil his meaning? On the contrary, Isaiah obeyed this injunction by speaking the word, time and again, as simply and as clearly as possible, in a plain, systematic and reasoned way. Such that he was later accused of acting like a kindergarten teacher (see **28:9–10**)! Motyer (p.79):
 if hearers are resistant to the truth, the only recourse is to tell them the truth yet again, more clearly than before. But to do this is to expose them to the risk of rejecting the truth yet again and, therefore, of increased hardness of heart. It could even be that the next rejection will prove to be the point at which the heart is hardened beyond recovery. The human eye cannot see this point in advance; it comes and goes unnoticed. But the all-sovereign God both knows it and appoints it as he presides in perfect justice over the psychological processes he created (*cf.* Ex. 4:21). It was at just such a point that Isaiah was called to office. His task was to bring the Lord’s word with fresh, even unparalleled clarity, but in their response people would reach the point of no return.
 So it was Isaiah’s sorry task to be instrumental in and preside over the terrible processes of the hardening of people’s hearts under the impact of the word of

*THIS IS OUR GOD: STUDIES IN THE PROHECY OF ISAIAH***6:10–7:1**

God. These verses, then, are not spoken in callous cynicism ('O, no one will ever listen!'), but belong to a particular point in time in God's action. Nevertheless, this process can happen at any time in history, and is terrible to watch.

See further the hardening of Pharaoh's heart: Exodus 4:21, 7:2–5: God said that He would harden Pharaoh's heart. First Pharaoh hardened his own heart: Exodus 5:2, 7:13–14, 22–23, 8:15, 19, 32, 9:7. Then God confirmed him in his stubbornness, and carried out his good purpose through that: Exodus 9:12, 34–35 10:1–2, 20, 27, 11:10, 14:1–8, 30–31. Hence Romans 9:14–18. God will never harden a heart that is soft towards Him. And even the hardening process will serve God's good purposes of love for the whole world.

See also Jesus in Mark 4:10–12, after telling the parable of the sower, about hearing the word of God. Even though in his own teaching he deliberately spoke in a way everyone could understand: Mark 4:33–34 (*contra* Barbara Thiering and others). John uses these words from Isaiah to sum up the whole of Jesus' teaching ministry John 12:37–43 (contrast Jesus' own relationship with the Father in v. 44–50). See also Paul in 2 Corinthians 4:1–6 and Acts 28:23–28.

- 11–13** Isaiah asks and is shown what will be for the duration of his ministry and beyond: devastation, deportation, desolation, and exile; then the revisiting of those who are left, with further working over. But again, with the note of promise and hope: the 'holy seed', or 'seed of holiness'—the Messiah (**11:1**) and the offspring of his holy action (**53:10–11**, **54:1**).

Assignment Question 5

Examine the call of Isaiah (6:1–13). What were the implications for Isaiah and the people among whom he ministered? What application might it have for us today?

THE KING AND HIS PEOPLE—7:1–11:16

Following his general introduction, and the account of his powerful personal call, Isaiah records two specific sets of prophecy to Judah (**7:1–9:7**) and to the northern kingdom of Israel (**9:8–11:16**), relating to the King and his people.

The word to Judah—7:1–9:7

- 7:1** About 735, see 2 Kings 15:36–16:20 and 2 Chronicles 28 esp. 5–7, the remarkable happening of 8–15, and 16–21. Under pressure of the growing power of Tiglath-pileser of Assyria, Judah's northern neighbours Syria and the northern kingdom of Israel were putting pressure on Judah to join them against Assyria, and invaded Judah. Ahaz asked for Assyria's help against them, and so brought the stronger power of Assyria into control of the whole region. Thus Ahaz was the one who finally sacrificed Judah's independence, and brought Judah and Jerusalem under subjugation to foreign powers forever thereafter—a real turning-point. And Isaiah was there.

THIS IS OUR GOD: STUDIES IN THE PROHECY OF ISAIAH

7:2–15

- 2** 'house of David': significant here, in light of the promise of 2 Samuel 7. Ahaz should not have been fazed in this way.
- 3** 'Shear-jashub' means 'a remnant will return'. A message of both disaster and hope: there will be such devastation that only a remnant will return, but God will be so faithful (compare **1:9**) that there will be a remnant that does return. So sure is Isaiah of the word that has come to him that he is prepared to put it in embodied form in the naming of his first-born son, presumably at the command of the LORD (as with his second son, see **8:1–4**). Ahaz would have been aware of this.
- 'conduit': Jerusalem's water supply came from outside the city via open channels, making it very vulnerable to attack and siege. (The underground water tunnel, still there today, was not put in until Hezekiah's time, see 2 Kings 20:20.) Even so, Isaiah counsels passive trust in the LORD as the nation's defence.
- 4** 'Be careful to *do nothing*'! Particularly not to enter into alliance with Assyria (see 2 Kings 16:7–9) against the spent forces of Syria and 'what-name' the son of Remaliah of Israel.
- 5–6** A determined attempt to bring an end to the royal line of David, against God's promise of 2 Samuel 7.
- 7–9** These nations are only as strong as their unbelieving heads, and God will see to it that they do not prevail. Whereas the head of Judah is Jerusalem and the head of Jerusalem is the son of David to whom God's promises have come.
- 'sixty-five years': Samaria was destroyed by the Assyrians and its inhabitants deported in 721 BC, and in 671 BC Esarhaddon, successor to Tiglath-pileser, brought foreign settlers into the area of the northern kingdom. From that time on, then, unlike Judah two hundred years later, any survivors of Israel would have no land they could call their own, and would be finished as a people—a very specific and accurate prediction.
- 'If you will not believe, surely you shall not be established': the whole crux of Isaiah's message. Ahaz is urged to simple trust in God's promises, rather than salvation by human works of politics and alliances.
- 10** It seems Ahaz did not respond accordingly to Isaiah's message of v. **4–9**. So another message comes to him from God with such urgency that Isaiah's name is not even mentioned as the intermediary through which it would have come—this is a message direct from God to Ahaz.
- 11** God is prepared to move heaven and earth to give Ahaz a sign of His faithfulness to the son of David.
- 12** Ahaz clothes his refusal in false piety. There is a sin of putting the LORD to the test in an unbelieving way (Psalm 95:9, Hebrews 3:7–19). But when the LORD Himself tells you to ask for a sign, the believing thing to do is to act on that. Here Ahaz decisively exposes his unbelieving heart, and in that action passes the point of no return (see above on **6:9–10**) for himself and those for whom he is responsible.
- 13–15** God will still give Ahaz a sign, but now it will be a sign of judgement.
- 'Immanuel' meaning 'God with us' is the expected son of David promised by God in 2 Samuel 7:12–14, and spoken of in Psalms 2, 45, 110 and other places (see **9:6–7**, **11:1–10**). As far as Ahaz and Isaiah are concerned, this one could come at any time. The sign is that when this one comes he will now, as a result of

THIS IS OUR GOD: STUDIES IN THE PROHECY OF ISAIAH

7:14–8:4

- Ahaz's refusal to trust God, eat the food of poverty (see v. 22). God would have done anything for Ahaz to ensure that it would be otherwise, and the coming of this one could have been glorious. But God's people from now on will be a devastated and subjugated and oppressed people, and Immanuel will be born into that, and will share it with them. This turns out to be the case, as in Luke 2:1–7.
- 14** 'a young woman': Hebrew *almah*, meaning 'virgin'. This verse is taken in Matthew 1:23 to refer to the birth of Jesus as the Messiah over seven hundred years later. A number of scholars having difficulty in accepting the virginal conception of Jesus, and the whole matter of predictive prophecy, have sought to dissociate Isaiah 7:14 from the birth of Jesus by saying that *almah* actually means 'young woman', not necessarily a virgin as such, and that Isaiah was referring to some local event closer at hand. Various theories are propounded, such as that 'Immanuel' was actually Hezekiah, or Maher-shalal-hash-baz, or a whole rash of babies produced by faithful Israelite women. This has been sufficient for some translators to translate *almah* as 'young woman' rather than 'virgin'. Motyer, in an exhaustive survey of explicit uses of *almah*, concludes that the correct translation here is really 'virgin', and that *almah* is never used of a married woman. So could it be that Isaiah was prophesying the coming of the Messiah as it actually happened over seven hundred years later?
- 16** Note that Isaiah puts no time on this. What he is saying is that by the time Immanuel has reached the age of discretion, these two kings will have long since ceased to be a threat.
- 17** An even worse plague than Syria and Israel—the full might of Assyria itself—is now promised to Ahaz as a result of his foolish action (see 2 Chronicles 28:19–21).
- 18–19** Total catastrophe will follow. From now on Judah will be swarmed upon by foreign nations. Egypt, Israel's former slave-driver, will never be any help to them against other enemies.
- 20** They will be shamed by conquest and captivity.
- 21–25** Those who remain will not be able to benefit from agriculture, but will be reduced to living only by what can be got from one or two domestic animals and wild bees—the food of poverty and oppression (see on v. 15).

Assignment Question 6

Examine Chapter 7. What is Ahaz being asked to do, and what does he prefer to do instead? What are the consequences for Judah and the house of David? What is the sign of hope none-the-less, and in what form and circumstances will this hope take shape?

- 8:1–4** 'Maher-shalal-hash-baz' meaning 'speed-spoil-haste-booty' signifies the relentless on-rushing onslaught of the invading enemy. Uriah the priest is mentioned, not very favourably, in 2 Kings 16:10–16, and this Zechariah, according to 2 Kings 18:2, could have been the king's father-in-law—indicating the circles in which Isaiah moved. The certified prediction of this boy's birth, and the calling of Isaiah's wife 'the prophetess', point to the sureness of this word of God enfleshed in the son to whom they give birth. He takes up in the immediate present the function earlier attached to the coming of Immanuel in **7:16**, thus freeing that unspecified prophecy to be applied to 'the latter time' (see **9:1**).

THIS IS OUR GOD: STUDIES IN THE PROHECY OF ISAIAH

8:5–17

Tiglath-pileser took much of Israel's territory in 733 BC, and Damascus fell in 732 BC, before this child would have been able to say its first words. Samaria fell finally in 721 BC (see 2 Kings 17).

5–8 'the waters of Shiloah' was the little stream that flowed from Gihon spring, where the kingship was passed on from David to Solomon (1 Kings 1:33–34, 45), into Jerusalem as the city's vulnerable water supply—a sign of their need to trust God and His promises for their protection and well-being. Instead of this, they have opted to trust what appears to be the more reliable and abundant supply of the king of Assyria, which will overtake them like a flood. To choose the world's ways is to be overwhelmed by them.

Ahaz may have had every political skill, logic, the harvested results of diplomatic experience—all 'the facts of the real world'—but when the people of God operate by 'what stands to reason' rather than what proceeds from faith, when they seek safety in the resources, policies and powers of the world—the king of Assyria instead of 'the King, the LORD Almighty' (6:5)—the things they trust guarantee their calamity. (Motyer p. 88)

What a message is that for our church today, and for our nation and world!

'...your land, O Immanuel': the land is only ever said to belong to the king, Israel as a whole, or the Lord Himself. So Immanuel is no ordinary personage. But when he comes to his land, it will be ruined as a result of unbelief, and there will be nothing for him to inherit there except suffering and loss at the hands of a foreign power (as in Mark 10:33–34).

9–10 Nevertheless, by the same token, neither will any of the nations that come against God's true people finally stand, no matter how much they gather themselves and plot together (see Psalm 2), because in Immanuel *God is with us!*

11–12 So Isaiah is told that the little conspiracy and alliance that terrified the people (**7:2**) is not to be feared by him and those with him—the remnant of the faithful.

there is a distinction between the secularised, politicised professing people of God and those, within that people, who turn to him with repentance and faith, who look to his word and obey it. (Motyer p. 92)

We do not always get that distinction right when we try to apply it to others. The important thing is to know where we stand, and to be consistently faithful in that. (There are a number of frightening 'conspiracy theories' current in some Christian circles today that may be safely discounted by those who know the sovereign God.)

13–15 God alone is to be our fear—the one we take utterly seriously in deep respect and loving obedience. For those who do this He becomes a sanctuary, a holy place of protection; for those who do not He is an offence, a stumbling-block and a snare—to those both in Israel and Judah, and eventually to Jerusalem itself.

16 This makes it all the more important to secure, preserve and attend to the authentic word they have received from God against subsequent additions or tampering, especially in adverse circumstances, such as they may have been exposed to, say, in the dark reign of Manasseh later on. This goes strongly against the presupposition of much modern scholarship that the text remained fluid and changeable in the light of events over decades or even centuries.

17 Having this sure word of God will fortify them to live through the calamities that they know will now follow from Ahaz's refusal to live by faith in God. They will not be immune from these calamities themselves, but through these dark times in

THIS IS OUR GOD: STUDIES IN THE PROHECY OF ISAIAH

8:18–9:6

- which God ‘will hide his face’ from His people, they will wait in patient expectation of His promises.
- 18** Thus this little prophetic family will be an embodied and continuing message from God among the people, whatever happens, and a sign of God’s abiding presence.
- 19–22** This true word from God far surpasses the false forbidden alternative words that people seek out to set their hopes on (see Deuteronomy 18:9–22, Leviticus 19:26, 31, 20:6, 27, and Manasseh 2 Kings 21:6). This false word will lead them only to ruination and doom.
- 9:1** Their faithful waiting will be rewarded with the fulfilment of God’s promise, emerging first in the very territory first subjected to Assyria’s heel, in 733 BC. No definite time is set: it will be ‘in the latter time’, following ‘the former time’ when the devastation occurred. Even if it has to wait another seven hundred years or more for its complete fulfilment, as in Matthew 4:12–17, Luke 1:79, yet the light at the end of the tunnel is so sure to the prophet that he can speak of it as if it has already happened! And the disciples can carry this hope into the future. ‘Galilee of the nations’: a hint that the time of hope will include the nations as well (see Matthew 28:10, 16–20).
- 2** ‘darkness’: see **8:22**. The darkness of judgement gives way to the light of God’s favour. This is an act of God (see Genesis 1:3, 2 Corinthians 4:6, Psalm 23:4).
- 3** The remnant of the few gives rise to the saving of the many (see **54:1**, Luke 13:23–24, Revelation 7:9). The era of Solomon is recalled (1 Kings 4:20)—the only king to rule truly on David’s throne over a united kingdom, with pictures of rejoicing at God-given harvest and conquest, which the people themselves have done nothing to bring about.
- 4** Recalling the Exodus from slavery in Egypt, and the conquest of the Midianites under Gideon (by a burst of light in the darkness—Judges 6–8)—both manifestly actions of God, while the people stood by.
- 5** The disposing of the accoutrements of war (compare **2:2–4**), and so the coming of peace. (A startling reading for Christmas services, but one which matches the truce held between the trenches on Christmas Day during the First World War.)
- 6** Verses **4** and **5** give the reason for the rejoicing in verse **3**, and verse **6** gives the cause. The very coming of this one, even before he has done anything, secures the victory and the peace.
- ‘a child is born’ of human parents (though see on **7:14**), ‘a son is given’ of royal dignity (see verse **7**) from God.
- ‘government’: princely executive authority is shouldered by this one (compare **22:22**), releasing the burdened shoulders of verse **4** (compare John 12:27, 14:1).
- ‘his name’: a God-given birth-name, compare Solomon/Jedidiah (2 Samuel 12:24–25).
- ‘Wonderful Counsellor’: with supernatural wisdom (compare Ahithophel 2 Samuel 16:23, Solomon 1 Kings 3:9, 12, Luke 11:31), capable of sustaining an everlasting kingdom.
- ‘Mighty God’ (compare **10:21**): as in Immanuel, ‘God with us’ (**7:14**, **8:8**). Psalm 2:7 and 45:6 accord divine status to the king, but nowhere so explicitly as this.

THIS IS OUR GOD: STUDIES IN THE PROHECY OF ISAIAH

9:6–12

Motyer (p. 104) effectively counters various attempts to downgrade this status on linguistic grounds.

‘Everlasting Father’: not used of kings but used of God in His concern for the helpless (Psalm 68:5), and His saving care and discipline of His people (Psalm 103:13, Proverbs 3:12, **63:16**, **64:8**, see **11:4**). Perhaps the new Adam (see Gen. 3:20). His rule will be according to the pattern of God’s Fatherhood (see Ephesians 3:14–15). Only an everlasting ruler can guarantee total security.

‘Prince of Peace’: not just the peace of forgiveness, but the *shalom* of fulfilled well-being, in goodwill and harmony, untroubled by conflict, in favour with God. This one lives in this peace of God himself, and as Prince administers it to his people (see John 14:27, 20:19–21, Ephesians 2:14).

7 ‘the throne of David’: here we see that the ‘son’ of verse **6** is none other than the Messiah promised to David in 2 Samuel 7. The ‘sign’ rejected by Ahaz in **7:10–16** will be wonderfully fulfilled in the future. But how can a son of David be ‘Mighty God’ and ‘Everlasting Father’? Jesus raises this question in Matthew 22:41–46. The answer is given in **11:2, 10** (compare Revelation 22:16): he comes from David, but is also the one from whom David himself comes.

‘government...peace’: a rule without exploitation—rather, the sharing of his own fulfilment (see on verse **6**).

‘righteousness’ is right principles, and ‘justice’ is right implementation and right practice. And the rule, spreading out over the whole earth, is endless, as promised to David.

‘zeal’: God’s jealous love that will not be content to allow His people to belong to anyone else.

Assignment Question 7

Examine 8:1–9:7. What is Judah faced with here? What is the role of Isaiah and his disciples in that situation? What is the great message they are given to pass on through dark times?

The word to Israel—9:8–11:16

Even though Isaiah is in the southern kingdom of Judah, the word of God’s prophet comes equally to the separated northern kingdom of Israel, since the covenant and the promises of God still pertain to the whole of God’s people. But God has a special way of dealing with Israel that is different from His treatment of Judah. 2 Kings 17 tells the story: Assyria invaded the northern regions in 733 BC; Damascus the capital of neighbouring Syria fell in 732, and Samaria the capital of Israel fell in 721 BC. The southern prophet Isaiah joins his voice to the earlier northern prophets Amos and Hosea (from 760 BC on) to serve God’s notice on Israel.

His hand is stretched out against Israel—9:8–10:4

He begins with a four-stanza prophetic poem with a repeated refrain (in verses **9:12, 17, 21, 10:4**, compare **5:25**).

9:8–12 Ignoring the issues.

8–9 “Jacob...Israel...Ephraim...Samaria”: different names for the northern kingdom.

10–12 They think the worst is over, and they can recover. But the LORD thinks differently.

*THIS IS OUR GOD: STUDIES IN THE PROHECY OF ISAIAH***9:12–10:15**

- 12** “his hand is stretched out still”: elsewhere used of God’s redeeming action (eg Exodus 6:6), here it signifies the LORD’s determination to make a full end of those who have finally rejected His word.
- 13–17** Failure in leadership (compare 3:1–15).
- 13** The only safe place when running before the wrath of God is to run into Him (compare Psalm 2:10–11).
- 14** “head and tail”: from one end to the other.
“palm branch and reed”: high and lowly.
- 15** False prophets were like the tail wagging at the whim of the dog.
- 16** Both are to blame, for both have had the word of God widely spoken to them, and have rejected it. (eg see Amos 7:10–14)
- 9:17** “fatherless and widows”: things are really bad when the Father of the fatherless and the Husband of the widow (Psalm 68:5) no longer cares for them.
“every one...every mouth”: without exception (compare Romans 3:9–18).
- 18–21** Self-imposed mutual destruction, brought about under the action of God. Under pressure of trouble, people nearby turn on each other.
- 20** “his neighbour’s flesh”: Hebrew literally “the flesh of his arm”—to devour your neighbour is to eat up yourself.
- 10:1–4** Legal oppression and exploitation: those who seek to secure their own advantage at the expense of others will be left without protection or security.

Assyria, the rod of my anger—10:5–34

- 5–15** Assyria, the unwitting agent of God’s wrath in the due destruction of Israel, will nevertheless himself have to answer to God for his godless and merciless arrogance. One of the most powerful passages in the Bible describing the action of God in history and the accountability of all the nations before Him. (Compare John 19:11 and Acts 2:23, where what happened to Jesus is clearly in the hand of God and in His plan of strong love, but Judas and Pilate and the others are also fully responsible for what they have done.) Assyria was the closest thing in the ancient world to the ruthless Nazi war machine of the 1930–40s.
- 5–6** “my...I”: all of this is under the initiative, control, and empowering of God Himself. The outstretched hand (**10:4**) finally falls.
- 7–11** But this is done in anything but a spirit of pious submission on the part of Assyria.
- 10** “idols”: empty “no-gods”—this outcome is brought about as a result of the worthlessness of false worship.
- 12** “I will punish”: God Himself pronounces the doom on Assyria through His prophet. The turning-point will come when Assyria comes up against the LORD’s sanctuary in Zion, after performing God’s necessary humbling of Judah and Jerusalem (see chapters **36–37**).
- 13–14** Assyria sees itself in the position of an invincible god, and attributes its unresisted advance to its own power and cleverness, rather than by the appointment of the LORD.
- 15** The true position of Assyria in relation to the sovereign LORD.

*THIS IS OUR GOD: STUDIES IN THE PROHECY OF ISAIAH***10:16–11:1**

- 16–19** The reducing of Assyria to a remnant (see **37:21–38**).
- 17** The judgement originates from Israel, and the LORD’s faithful and jealous love for His covenant people (as in Genesis 12:3).
- 20–23** The remnant of Israel.
- 20–21** Threatened with the expansion of Assyria, the northern kingdom of Israel had turned for support to their long-time enemies the Syrians (see **7:1–2**, 1 Kings 20). In this time they will turn to the LORD.
- 22** “though...only”: may be a mistranslation—could mean the “remnant” will be as many as the sand of the sea, as promised to Abraham (Genesis 22:17, see Revelation 7:9).
- 23** This is because the consummation that the LORD will make as sentencing Judge and cleansing Redeemer (see **6:5–7**) in the midst of the history of nations will be “overflowing with righteousness”.
- 24–34** The immediate implications for Jerusalem, in the face of the coming Assyrian onslaught.
- 26–27b** See 9:4.
- 27c–32** A poem envisaging the advancing march of the Assyrian enemy through the towns north of Jerusalem right up to the capital itself.
- 33–34** At the very moment that the Assyrians are at the height of their conquering power, they will be brought to judgement. The one who has been the axe (verse **15**) will have the axe turned on him, like clear-falling the mighty forests of Lebanon, by none other than the LORD Himself.

Assignment Question 8

Examine 10:5–34. What is the role of Assyria in God’s plan? How will Assyria be answerable for what it has done? In the light of this passage and Acts 2:23, reflect on how God’s control of history relates with human responsibility.

The root and the offspring of David—11:1–16

Two evenly-balanced poems bring the glorious hope to bear out of this scene of the devastation of Israel’s enemies and of Israel herself.

The coming of Messiah—11:1–10

- 11:1** No date is given: this is an expression of the ever-present hope (see Genesis 3:15, 12:7 “offspring” see Galatians 3:16, Genesis 49:10, 2 Samuel 7:12–16).
 “the stump of Jesse”: Jesse was David’s father. The stump is the royal house of David after it has been cut down, ie at a time when there is no longer any king sitting on the throne of David in Jerusalem. Isaiah had foreseen this in **6:11–13**, and predicted it in **7:9**. When everything else has come to an end, and all wrath is fulfilled, God will still be faithful to His promises.
 “a shoot...a branch...out of his roots”: he comes from Jesse rather than David, so he is seen as a new son of Jesse, ie a new David. Yet he comes from the root of Jesse, or is actually the root of Jesse (**11:10**). So this one who comes from David’s family is also the one from whom David himself has come (compare

THIS IS OUR GOD: STUDIES IN THE PROHECY OF ISAIAH

11:2–11

- Mark 12:35–37, Revelation 22:16). Such must it be with the one who is Immanuel (**7:14**), ‘Mighty God’ and ‘Everlasting Father’ (**9:6**).
- 2** In Isaiah the Messiah is the one on whom the Spirit of the LORD rests (see **42:1, 59:21, 61:1**, compare John 1:32–34).
 ‘wisdom and understanding’: wisdom is a general sense of what is right and true, understanding is insight into particular situations.
 ‘counsel and might’: counsel is the ability to plan well with good strategy (see David’s counsellors Ahithophel and Hushai in 2 Samuel 16:15–17:23), and might is the military or other strength to carry it through.
 ‘knowledge and the fear of the LORD’: knowledge is truth grasped and applied in life; in the Bible it is also intimate personal relationship (eg Genesis 4:1): so knowledge of the LORD is close relationship in love with God. And fear of the LORD goes with that: it is that which takes the reality of God with utmost moral seriousness, in obedience, conduct, loyalty, and worship (see Genesis 20:11, Exodus 20:20, Nehemiah 5:9, 15, Psalms 2:11, 5:7). It is the basis of true kingship (2 Samuel 23:1–7), and the beginning of all wisdom (Psalm 111:10).
- 3a** So it is little wonder that his special delight is in the fear of the LORD. This is his inner disposition, that, unlike his predecessors on the throne of David, is matched consistently with his outward bearing and actions.
 (Later translations used a different word to translate the first occurrence of ‘fear’ in verse **2** as ‘godliness’, thus making ‘seven gifts of the Spirit’, later enshrined in a confirmation prayer based on this passage, which thus saw confirmation as a participation in the ministry of the Messiah in the end time! True and attractive as this is, the ‘seven’ gifts of the Spirit here are endowments brought by the Spirit in three pairs of two.)
- 3b–5** Thus his judgements will come, not from outward appearance or hearsay, but from the heart of God’s all-seeing justice and goodness and fairness and consistent faithfulness to His covenant, which gird his very being.
 ‘rod of his mouth...breath of his lips’: the sentence of judgement which he pronounces by speaking the word of God’s truth (see John 12:47–48, 15:1–4, Mark 8:38, Revelation 19:15).
- 6–9** Eden is restored in the new creation (see Genesis 1:27–31, 2:8–17, 3:1–24, Luke 23:39–43)
- 6** Old hostilities are reconciled, and human dominion is restored.
- 7** ‘Nature red in tooth and claw’ no longer applies, as all the animals return together to plant-eating.
- 8** The curse is removed, and the enmity between the serpent and the seed of the woman is no more. Security and freedom betoken the new age.
- 9** This comes not from the old Eden, but from the new Jerusalem, spreading out to encompass the whole earth with that intimate relationship with God for which we have been made (compare Revelation 21:1–22:5, 7:15–17.)
- 10** Reverts to the kingly figure of **11:1**, unfurling the banner of his rule, and forms the bridge with what follows.
- The gathering of the people—11:11–16*
- 11** ‘In that day’, linking with verse **10**, places all this in the end time.

THIS IS OUR GOD: STUDIES IN THE PROHECY OF ISAIAH

11:11–12:2

‘a second time’: the first time was the rescue of Israel from Egypt; this second time will be the redemption of God’s people from all the nations of the world.

‘Assyria . . . Egypt’: the two great powers that flanked the holy land—Israel’s ancient and contemporary enemies.

‘Pathros . . . Ethiopia’: regions beyond Egypt.

‘Elam . . . Shinar’: regions beyond Assyria. (The use of ‘Shinar’, the ancient name for Babylon, indicates a dating of this prophecy prior to the rise of Babylon as a significant power, and prior to the exile two hundred years later, against some scholars who see this as part of a ‘prophecy’ after the event.)

‘Hamath’: the far northern regions.

‘coastlands of the sea’: the far western end of the Mediterranean.

- 12** The LORD will be faithful to His promises of both judgement and blessing: as He has driven out and scattered His people, so He will bring them back, no matter how far they have gone. (The ultimate fulfilment of this is spoken by Jesus in Matthew 24:29–31.)
- 13** The rankling antagonism between the northern and southern kingdoms will be laid to rest, as they are united in allegiance to the one king, as in the days of David and Solomon (see 2 Samuel 5:1–5; 1 Kings 4:1; 12:16–24; compare Ezekiel 37:15–28).
- 14** The conquest of all the traditional enemies of Israel signifies the coming of the reign of the Prince of peace, fulfilled by the submission of the nations to the gospel (see Acts 15:12–18; Romans 15:8–21).
- 15–16** In a new figurative dividing of the Red Sea (Exodus 14:10–31), and a new crossing of the River (Joshua 3:7–4:14—this time the Euphrates River, not just the Jordan), God removes all obstacles to a world-wide return to Himself.

Assignment Question 9

Examine chapter 11, in connection with 7:14 and 9:6–7. Where does this one come from? What are his qualities? What will he do? What will be the nature of the age he ushers in? How is the fulfilment of all this shown in the New Testament?

THE SONG OF SALVATION—12:1–6

As the song of Moses and of Miriam followed the rescue from Egypt (Exodus 15:1–21), so this song follows the world-wide redemption (compare Revelation 15:2–4). It also harks back to chapter 6, as Isaiah’s personal response to the salvation he experienced there, rounding off this whole section.

- 12:1** Note once again that both the anger and the comfort are from God. This is not God’s capriciousness, but His determination to press right through His wrath to propitiation on our behalf, to effect reconciliation, not on the basis of our willingness to have Him, but on His desire to have us (see 1 John 4:9–10). This is highly securing.
- 2** God’s salvation of us, or God Himself being our salvation, brings faith, and the end of fear (compare 1 John 4:16–19), strength (as in 6:8), and song, as here. This is Isaiah’s own personal testimony and praise. Isaiah then, as in all his prophecy, turns this personal experience to the hope of all God’s people.

*THIS IS OUR GOD: STUDIES IN THE PROHECY OF ISAIAH***12:3–13:1**

- 3** ‘water’: as in Exodus 15:22–27, 17:1–7 (compare John 4:1–26, 7:37–39).
- 4** The community of the redeemed joins Isaiah in his song of salvation. Thanks for salvation gives rise to constant dependence on God in prayer (compare Psalm 32 esp. vv. 6, 8), and the joining in with the proclaiming of His being and actions as sovereign among the nations.
- 5** Echoes Exodus 15:1, but the scene is greatly enlarged: not just the shores of the Red Sea, but the boundless realm of the whole earth.
- 6** The address is feminine singular, to the new Jerusalem as the bride, ecstatically rejoicing in the immediacy of her exalted Bridegroom and Husband, the Holy One, the King, the LORD of hosts.

Assignment Question 10

Examine chapter 12. How does this relate to Isaiah’s personal experience of salvation in chapter 6? How does Isaiah see this coming through to the whole world?

GOD, ISRAEL AND THE NATIONS—13:1–27:13

In the previous section, we have seen hints that the LORD’s rule extends beyond Israel to cover the whole earth (**9:7, 11:9, 10–16**). It is the LORD who determines the life of nations besides Israel: see **8:4, 9:9, 10:5–19, 33–34**. In this next collection of prophecies from various times, Isaiah now goes on to show God’s sovereign rule over all the nations, to serve his purpose of holy love for the whole world, focussed on the nation of Israel. This is consistent with the vision and promise of Genesis 10 and 12:1–3

This section consists of two series of five oracles each, followed by a series of songs and revelations. These three series match up with each other in structure and content to underline the message (from Motyer):

| <i>Oracles</i> | | <i>Songs and Revelations</i> |
|--------------------------------------|--|---------------------------------------|
| Babylon 13:1–14:27 | ‘Wilderness of the sea’ (Babylon) 21:1–10 | The desolate city 24:1–20 |
| Philstia 14:28–32 | Dumah ‘Silence’ (Edom) 21:11–12 | The LORD in Zion 24:21–23 |
| Moab 14:1–16:14 | Arabia (‘Evening’?) 21:13–17 | The great feast 25:1–12 |
| Damascus/Ephraim 17:1–18:7 | ‘The valley of vision’ (Jerusalem) 22:1–25 | The city of God 26:1–21 |
| Egypt 19:1–20:6 | Tyre 23:1–18 | The final gathering 27:1–13 |

The first series refers specifically to various nations, the second series is more circumspect, and the third has general application. Babylon and allusions to it head up each series. God’s people occupy fourth place in each series, surrounded by nations from the north, south, east and west. The final one in each series speaks of the nations coming from far and near. (This pattern may just be discerned and imposed by the predilection of the commentator, but it

seems time and again Isaiah himself had an eye and feel for this kind of detail. Compare the three series of seals, trumpets, and bowls in the Book of Revelation.)

God, Israel and The Nations—First Series—13:1–20:6

The Destruction of Babylon—13:1–14:27

- 13:1** ‘oracle . . . saw’: the word of God brings vision, knowledge and understanding—see above on **1:1** under ‘The Book of Isaiah’.
‘Babylon’: in Isaiah’s time a small but up-and-coming province of the Assyrian Empire under Merodach-Baladan—see chapter **39**. Isaiah already knew that the destruction predicted for Jerusalem (**1:24–26**, **3:18–4:1**, **5:24–30**, **6:11–13**) would not finally be carried out by the might of Assyria (**10:12–34**). After the visit of the envoys from Babylon in 702 BC (**39:1–7**), the final antagonist is identified. Isaiah begins this section with God’s victory over this arch-enemy (even though, unknown to Isaiah, this was not to take place until 539 BC. See above under ‘One Isaiah, or three?’). Knowing this, Isaiah then needed to know how the issue of the promises of God regarding David’s family and Jerusalem was to be addressed. This prophecy is part of that answer.
- 2–3** God himself has his armies in place awaiting the signal to enter and take the city.
‘my proudly exulting ones’: as with Assyria (**10:5–34**), God employs the arrogance of the conquering army to his own ends, even if He disapproves of their arrogance and will call them to account for it.
- 4–16** The scene enlarges to depict ‘the day of the LORD’ (verse **6**, compare Amos 5:18–20), the day of final judgement. Yet, as with the apocalyptic teachings of Jesus (e.g. Mark 13), the final judgement at the end of time, and the specific judgement upon the city in history, are all of a piece, and cannot be separated out. The truth is that the ‘end’ is always just this far above our heads, and ready to break in upon us at the appointed times. Any judgement in history is a manifestation of God’s final judgement upon all humanity. But this final judgement Christ has now borne in his own flesh on the cross, for all who believe (see John 5:24, Romans 8:1–4).
- 17–22** So the end will come upon Babylon, at the appointed time, as it surely did in 539 BC.
- 14:1–2** This will be for the vindication of Israel, in fulfilment of God’s ancient promises. Note how people of other nations will be incorporated into the destiny of Israel, either as fellow citizens, or as captive slaves. (Compare the final victory of Christ in Philippians 2:9–11.) Or it could be that those who have willingly joined themselves to the Lord’s people will be glad to be of service to them in the kingdom of grace and peace that spreads over the whole earth (Motyer).
- 3** ‘rest’: removal of the curse of the Fall, full security of homeland, effective redemption from slavery—the ‘sabbath rest’ of Hebrews 3–4.
- 4–23** The ‘taunt [*or* true saying] against the king of Babylon’: A masterful poem. Examination of the words used verify it as the work of Isaiah of Jerusalem, and of pre-exilic origin (Motyer p. 143, note 1), despite attempts by some scholars to characterise it as a ‘prophecy after the event.’ This prophecy has specific historical reference to the king of Babylon who fell finally in 539 BC, but goes beyond that to encompass all oppressors of history, and the universal reality in

THIS IS OUR GOD: STUDIES IN THE PROHECY OF ISAIAH

14:4–28

every age, from ‘Babel’ of Genesis 11 to the ‘Babylon’ of Revelation 17–18, of a grasping and oppressive world-system in league with evil powers, and beyond that to the power of evil that controls it—the fallen angel Satan.

- 4–8** Relief, peace and joy come over the whole world when the LORD lays the tyrant low.
- 9–15** The scene moves to Sheol, the place of the dead, as the Babylonian tyrant arrives there (compare Ezekiel 32:17–31). In the Bible, death is not the end; we still remain ourselves, in a changed state and place. In Sheol, in the Old Testament, we can still be recognised as ourselves. But existence there is diminished in weakness (‘shades’), with a loss of earthly powers and status—it is ‘the great leveller’. The dead there await the fullness of the resurrection, revealed in full in the New Testament.
- 11** The grisly reality of death puts paid to earthly self-indulgence in pride and pleasure.
- 12–15** “Day Star”: Canaanite mythology knew of the morning star that attempted to usurp rule over heaven and was subsequently demoted. This becomes a picture here of the pride and fall of the king of Babylon. It has also served for many reading this passage as a picture of the fall of the accusing angel Satan (“Lucifer”, compare Revelation 12:7–12)—the power behind his throne. Here supreme arrogance is met by total ruin, as of some fallen god.
- 16–20a** The taunt over the fallen giant continues from an earthly point of view. He has no memorial or family tomb—his dead body is heaped up ignominiously with all the others slain in battle.
- 20b–23** The LORD himself guarantees that this oppressive reality will not be perpetuated.
- 24–25** To guarantee that all this will be so, even long after the lifetime of those who first heard it, the LORD gives Isaiah a verifiable prophecy that they will see fulfilled in their own day: the end of Assyrian power as it comes against Jerusalem in 702 BC. As they see this come to pass in their own time, so they can be assured of the truth of all that God has said through Isaiah regarding the times to come.
- 26–27** Thus the sovereignty of God over all the earth and over all history is underlined: His purposes are sure.

Assignment Question 11

Examine 13:1–14:27, and compare it with Revelation 17–18. How is the historical demise of Babylon related to the fall of prideful evil and the evil world-system generally?

Philistia and Zion—14:28–32

- 28** ‘the year that king Ahaz died’: (compare **6:1**) 715 BC. Ahaz was the one whose refusal of the way of faith and liaison with Assyria brought the end of David’s family as an independent sovereign dynasty and signalled its demise (chapter **7**). Perhaps neighbouring Philistia, on the coastal regions to the west, although Israel’s traditional enemy, had sent a message of condolence to Jerusalem, and was making overtures to the new king Hezekiah with a view to a possible alliance against Assyria (see verse **32**: ‘messengers’). Various Philistine cities were involved in anti-Assyrian uprisings in 734, 720, 711, and 705–701 BC. How was Israel to respond? This oracle came in reply. Ahaz may have been faithless, but

THIS IS OUR GOD: STUDIES IN THE PROHECY OF ISAIAH

14:28–16:5

- God remains faithful to His promises (compare Romans 3:4: ‘Let God be true, though every man be false’).
- 29** ‘the rod which smote you’: David, and his successors, now under the thumb of the Assyrians. But the Philistines are not to gloat over this demise of their former conqueror. For, like Moses’ rod (see Exodus 4:1–5; 7:8–12), the rod of David will turn into a darting poisonous serpent to them, and they will not survive (**30b**).
- 30** But God’s ‘firstborn’ son Israel (see Exodus 4:22–23), poor and needy though he be, will be preserved and cared for, while God puts an end to the Philistines, root and branch.
- 31** All the Philistine cities will suffer from the Assyrian invasion, as the army marches in step steadily southward, stirring up a great cloud of dust as it approaches.
- 32** So what answer is to be given to the messengers from Philistia? The same answer that Isaiah has been giving all along—the sure promise of God. Israel will not need Philistia’s help, and will not succumb to Philistia’s fate. God’s commitment to His people, weak and even sinful as they are, should never be lightly estimated.

God weeps for Moab—15:1–16:14

Moab, alongside the Dead Sea to the south-east of the land of Israel, was related to Israel through Abraham’s nephew Lot (see Genesis 19:30–38 for Moab’s disreputable origins), and to David through his great-grandmother Ruth (see Ruth 4:13–22). For this reason it may have sought refuge in Israel from the depredations of the Assyrians (**16:1–4a**). Even though it could be this way, Moab’s pride is its downfall.

- 15:1** Ar on the northern border of Moab, and Kir at the centre, are laid waste ‘in a night’: the devastation of the country is sudden and complete.
- 2** ‘Dibon...Nebo...Medeba’: widespread devastation or perhaps the northward movement of the refugees, as they seek some comfort from their religion at the shrines on ‘the high places’.
- 3** Grief and sorrow from war casualties strike into every home.
- 4** These three cities are even further north. Even the hardened soldiers are reduced to tears.
- 5–9** The LORD himself joins in the weeping.
- 5–6** The towns and water-courses and landscape of Moab is no less well known to the Maker of all.
- 7** He sees the refugees pitifully trying to carry away all their life’s possessions.
- 8** He hears their weeping and wailing.
- 9** He sees the river of blood shed in battle. Yet He weeps even as He undertakes to pass further devastating judgement on Moab, as a judge might weep for a murderer as he passes the necessary sentence on him.
- 16:1–4a** The leaders in desperate panic (reflected in the rhythm of the short Hebrew lines in the poem) send tribute to Judah in an appeal for asylum, especially as the women are so vulnerable in this suffering.
- 4b–5** An assurance is given (from the LORD?) that Judah and David will be the centre of right government (as in **11:1–3**), and thus a refuge for all the nations.

THIS IS OUR GOD: STUDIES IN THE PROHECY OF ISAIAH

16:6–17:11

- 6** But Moab has no heart or intention to submit to the LORD or to Israel's king, and this is the reason for the continuing judgement that will ensue (see Genesis 12:3).
- 7–11** So the weeping recommences, even more loudly, as the LORD calls upon all to join Him in this fierce sorrow.
- 7** 'raisin-cakes': perhaps meaning all the local delicacies are cut off. Or maybe these were offerings in false worship to other gods (compare Jeremiah 44:19).
- 8–10** Famed national produce and honour among the other nations are stripped away.
- 11** God's compassionate inner being is racked in agony for this prideful nation, in more than just a token way.
- 12** Over the futility of his unavailing false religion. (Do we share God's agony for the heathen in their hopeless attempts at alternative religion?)
- 13–14** The final word on Moab comes, making the foregoing general predictions very specific.

Damascus and Ephraim—17:1–18:7

The background to this is 2 Kings 16:1–9, **7:3–9**. Damascus was the capital of Syria (Aram), with whom the northern kingdom of Israel (Ephraim) had entered into an alliance against the southern kingdom of Judah. This oracle signals the destruction of both, and of God's continuing purposes for them, and for the whole world. Damascus fell in 732 BC and Samaria, the capital of Israel/Ephraim, in 721 BC (2 Kings 17:1–23). Yet the judgements of God are with a view to people returning to God.

- 17:1–2** The bustling city of Damascus will become devoid of population, and its ruins will be left to the flocks of sheep, with no one to frighten them away.
- 3** Ephraim, too, will be caught up in this destruction. Its alliance with ungodly Damascus will give it no security, and Ephraim's defection from its high calling as the people of the LORD will prevent it from ever bringing any blessing upon Syria. God alone is their 'fortress'. Yet, just as God has promised a remnant to Israel ('the glory of the children of Israel'), so too the Gentile nation Syria will, amazingly, be included in the world-wide remnant of the people of God. This now becomes a recurring theme in these chapters.
- 4–6** The first of three sections ('in that day', see verses 7, 9) that depict what will happen when the demise of Israel ('Jacob')/Ephraim takes place. First the country wastes away from within, then outside forces come to 'harvest' it, and to glean the pickings, until very little is left. The 'Valley of Rephaim', south of Jerusalem, was where the poorest people gleaned what was left over after the harvest.
- 7–8** The effect of this will be a cleansing from idolatry and a return to the Lord: to the One who made them, rather than the things they themselves have made. Note how people seek to make their own way to God in a self-reliant way by setting up altars, seek to draw on God's power for themselves by setting up the Asherim poles, and seek to cajole God's favour with offerings of incense. In the face of the reality of God, these will cease to satisfy. Note how the prophecy has now risen above its specific historical setting to be more generally applicable.
- 9–11** God is more reliable than any 'strong city'. Desolation comes as a result of not trusting in the saving God alone for provision, protection and strength. By some kind of garden magic the people seek to influence the powers that be to work in their favour. But this brings only a harvest of incurable pain.

THIS IS OUR GOD: STUDIES IN THE PROHECY OF ISAIAH

17:12–19:18

- 12–14** Though Assyria is not mentioned by name, these verses reflect the widespread disruption caused by the expansion of the Assyrian empire, and the ill-fated siege of Jerusalem by Sennacherib in 701 B.C (chapters **36–37**). But it embodies principles as to who controls the affairs of world history in every age. The restless antagonism of the nations against God (see Psalm 2:2–6) is likened to the surging of the seas (compare **57:20**, Revelation 17:1–2, 15), but their disappearance is like a vanishing dust-storm.
- 14** Compare 37:36, 10:16–19.
- 18:1–7** In 715 B.C. an Ethiopian called Piankhi gained control of Egypt and sought to form alliances with surrounding states against Assyria. Isaiah had already established that this worldly ploy was of no avail in the case of Syria and Ephraim/Israel. Prophetically, he redeploys the ambassadors as messengers of the LORD, with a message for the whole world! He bids them look to the LORD, who in a most self-possessed way presides over all the affairs of nations as He does over the processes of nature. The outcome of His decisive action will be an all-time peace, as the nations from far and near bring tribute to the LORD (as in Revelation 21:22–27).

Egypt and the World under God—19:1–20:6

Confronted by the power of Assyria, after the collapse of Syria and Ephraim/Israel, Judah and Jerusalem were tempted to turn to an alliance with the other great super-power, Egypt, Israel's ancient enemy, who had anti-Assyrian ambitions, for help and support. Isaiah, with his message of dependence alone upon the utterly reliable LORD of all the earth, warns against the folly and uselessness of depending upon Egypt (compare chapter **31** and **30:6–7; 36:6**), and goes on to present a breathtaking vision of God's people being extended to include even the great world powers at present opposed to God's rule.

- 19:1–15** The collapse of Egypt.
- 1–4** As the LORD brings His presence to bear on mighty Egypt, the power of the 'gods' and the self-sufficiency of the people are shown up for what they are not, giving rise to internal dissension and civil war, loss of morale, purpose and direction, the resorting to false religion, and political tyranny.
- 5–10** Economic disaster, as the Nile River, the life-blood of Egypt, is afflicted.
- 11–15** Confusion and stupidity reign among those in power, brought about by the LORD, of whose wisdom and purposes they are utterly ignorant (compare Rom. 1:21–23; 1 Cor. 1:20; 2:6–8), until there is nothing that anyone, high or lowly, can do.
- 16–25** The healing of Egypt. Just as verses **1–15** majored on the LORD'S smiting of Egypt, so these verses concentrate on His healing of Egypt (see verse **22**), and its incorporation into the people of God.
- 16–17** The fear of the Lord (compare v. **1**): as at the time of Sennacherib, there is an acknowledgment that Judah lies at the centre of the holy God's purposes of love and favour.
- 18** One language and one Lord. In contrast to the disunity and confusion of v. **2**, there is the unity of one language and one worship in Egypt. But it is the language of the land of the people of God, and the worship of their God YHWH. If five specific cities are referred to, we do not know which they are. We do know that

THIS IS OUR GOD: STUDIES IN THE PROHECY OF ISAIAH

19:18–20:6

there was a city called Heliopolis ('Sun-City) near the Nile delta (now Cairo). The first capital of Egypt, it always remained the most sacred and influential of Egyptian cities.

- 19–22** Reconciliation with God (contrast v. **3**). An altar of witness in the land of Egypt (compare Joshua 22) testifies that the people of Egypt belong no less to the God of Israel. They will find that they have a real and effective relationship with God in prayer. They, like the Israelites, will have a direct revelation of God, and will be able to respond fully in worship and service. Far from being under a hard taskmaster (v. **4**), they will find themselves in the discipline and instruction of the Lord, as His true children.
- 23** Highway for unity. No longer under oppression, Egypt will be united with its ancient enemy Assyria in the worship of Israel's God!
- 24** In place of the 'spirit of confusion' (v. **14**), Egypt will be in the blessing of God, together with Assyria; one with Israel as 'my people', 'the work of my hands', 'my heritage'. The astonishing audacity of this pronouncement prefigures the cleansed and holy unity of all nations in Christ: see Ephesians 1:10, 3:4–6, Revelation 21:22–22:2.
- 20:1–6** How are Isaiah's hearers to know that God will bring such an unlikely thing to happen? At this point in his collected works Isaiah relates a real incident that demonstrated the Lord's power over the nations in their own day. About the time of the fall of the nearby Philistine city of Ashdod to Sargon II (722–705 B.C.) in 711 B.C., in which once again Egypt failed to come to the party, Isaiah was acting out a prophecy he had been given for those in Jerusalem who were scheming to make an alliance with Egypt against Assyria. For three years he walked naked and barefoot in the royal court. In such a way are prophets called to live out their message in their lives, often at great personal cost (eg Hosea 1:2–3, 3:1–2, Ezekiel 4:4–8, 24:15–27). It was a way of saying that this is how Egypt, on whom they were looking to depend, would end up. For three years the schemers and all they were trying to do would have been inescapably confronted by this word of the Lord in the person of Isaiah. The prophecy was borne out in their own time by the defeat of Egypt by Assyria at the battle of Eltekeh in 701 B.C.

Assignment Question 12

What can we learn from Isaiah's prophetic oracles concerning Philistia, Moab, Damascus/Ephraim and Egypt (Isa. 14:28–20:6) about God and about God's purposes for the nations, centred on Jesus Christ? What application can we see for today?

God, Israel and the Nations—Second Series—21:1–23:18

Chapters **13–27** consist of three series of five oracles each, dealing with God's actions among the nations with regard to Israel. The first series, chapters **13–20**, mentioned specific nations by name, though rapidly expanded to present a world vision, as it traced God's fulfilment of His promises in all the earth. This second series, chapters **21–23**, while still naming some of the nations, is more circumspect, and focuses more on unrelieved judgement and the coming of darkness.

‘The Wilderness of the Sea’ (Babylon)—21:1–10

Verse **9** tells us that this relates to the fall of Babylon. The final fall of Babylon in 539 B.C. at the hand of Cyrus, alluded to in chapters **13–14**, naturally comes to mind. But there were a number of other times Babylon fell, at the hand of Assyria: 710 (Sargon II) and 702 (Sennacherib), in response to the rebellion of Merodach-Baladan; 689 (Sennacherib again—these all during the reign of Hezekiah in Jerusalem); and 648 B.C. (Assurbanipal). Elam and Media (v. **2**) were around at this time, mostly as allies of Babylon against Assyria, though Elam was off the scene by 639 B.C., a hundred years before the fall of Babylon to Cyrus. This prophecy seems to fit best the fall of Babylon to Sennacherib in 689 B.C., especially as this was a particularly devastating one (see verses **3–4**), compared with which Cyrus’s takeover was relatively peaceful. This prophecy perhaps comes from the time in chapter **39** (around 705 B.C.), when Isaiah is attempting to dissuade Hezekiah from entering into a relationship with the up and coming power of Babylon, which he has been shown is doomed from the start, that Israel might not be caught up in its demise (compare **52:11**, Revelation 18:1–4, 2 Corinthians 6:14–7:1).

- 21:1** Pictures of successive dust storms over the Negeb desert to the south of Judah bring to Isaiah’s mind another desert area further east by the Persian Gulf: the site of Merodach-Baladan’s Babylon.
- 2a** The message is that, contrary to the hopes and schemes of the Babylonians and their allies, Assyria is still going to continue its plunder and destruction unchecked.
- 2b** Isaiah ‘listens in’ on the envoys from Merodach-Baladan as they seek to convince Judah to join the alliance with Elam and Media, with the promise, made by every prospective new government, of better things to come.
- 3–4** But the prospect that comes to Isaiah is one of shock and horror and appalling devastation, which the prophet feels personally, that Israel could get caught up in if it goes down that way.
- 5** Meanwhile the leaders in Jerusalem, regardless of this, settle the deals with feasting and sabre-rattling speeches.
- 6–9** But Isaiah can be no part of this, for he has been given the exacting calling and responsibility to be God’s watchman, day and night, to announce what is really coming—the terrible fall of Babylon.
- 10** So he makes a heart-felt appeal to Judah not to bring yet more suffering upon itself, but to turn and rely solely on the God who has made them His own. So again, on the larger scale, God’s people are not to get caught up in the ways and pleasures of the doomed world-city that seeks to organise its life without regard to its Creator.

Assignment Question 13

What is the likely historical background of 21:1–10, and how does it connect with chapter 39? What was the import of the prophet’s message for his own time? What does this passage tell us about the ministry of a prophet? What message do you see in it for our own day?

Dumah ‘Silence’ (Edom)—21:11–12

11 ‘Seir’ is the nation of Edom (the descendants of Esau, Jacob’s brother), south-east of Judah. A lone Edomite seeks prophetic counsel from Isaiah, pictured still on his perch as a watchman (see v. **6–9**).

‘what of the night?’: we are in darkness—what is going to happen? Will it ever end?

12 Isaiah’s answer does not hold out a lot of immediate hope: the darkness will end, but then more darkness will descend. I cannot tell you when the end will be. It could be a long time. You will have to wait, as I do, and come back later if you want to find out more. Isaiah speaks out of his experience of protracted watching and waiting through dark times, though he knows that the end is sure in God’s good purposes. The end will come; the end is not yet (compare the tension in Mark 13:5–8, 28–33). Patient waiting it out is required. So there are times when mature counsellors will not raise false hopes, nor settle on some half-way outcome. There are times when there is not a lot that can be said. So the title ‘Dumah’—the land of silence (compare Psalm 94:17, 115:17: the place of the dead)—reflects the tone and mood of this poetic oracle.

Arabia (‘Evening?’)—21:13–17

13 ‘Arabia’ (translated ‘the desert plain’ in *NRSV*) with a slight change could be translated ‘evening’. Or perhaps it is a play on words: the Arabs meet their eventide.

13–15 Dedan and Teman were Arab regions hundreds of kilometres south-east of Judah between the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf. Well and truly Gentile regions. This area was caught up in the disruption of the to-ing and fro-ing of armies in the Assyrian times. Here refugees rendered homeless by the clashes of a distant battlefield seek ministrations among their own kind. The date could be the campaign of Sargon II against these tribes in 715 B.C., or the subduing of them when they joined Merodach-Baladan’s rebellion in 703. Moab sought refuge briefly in Judah in **16:1–7**, but refused to come under Israel’s God and His king. No less are these Gentiles able to receive any more than temporary help from their own people. The nations of this world are not able finally to solve their own problems or guarantee their own security.

16–17 For the LORD, who commands all these things, and has chosen Israel as the pivot of His actions among the nations, tells His prophet what is to be in a very short while with regard to these regions. Once again, as in **16:14**, a specific event is prophesied within a definite time-scale (‘hireling’ is one on a fixed contract, not with permanent employment, i.e. it will come to a definite termination), to bear out the truth of the longer-term predictions.

Assignment Question 14

Look at the two short oracles in 21:11–12 and 21:13–16. Give an account of what each one is about, and their implications for how we may see and experience things today.

‘The Valley of Vision’ (Jerusalem)—22:1–25

The self-sufficient self-reliance of this-worldly security—in city, individual and family life—is condemned in Jerusalem.

- 22:1–14** The city.
- 1–2a** ‘valley of vision’: an allusive title to Jerusalem (see verses **4–11**), though it is not mentioned by name. The strong impression given to Isaiah, so different from that embraced by the people, is of the valley of the shadow of death (Psalm 23:4). ‘tumultuous city’: a picture of celebration and self-congratulation, perhaps at the completion of the engineering defence marvels of verses **8–11**, before the invasion by Sennacherib in 701 B.C.
- 2b–3** What Isaiah sees coming to Jerusalem in the future is very different. Fulfilled in the events of 597 B.C. (see 2 Kings 25:4).
- 4** Isaiah is incapable of joining in their celebrations, as they are incapable, in their present condition, of understanding his grief or participating in his mourning (compare Ecclesiastes 7:2). ‘the destruction of the daughter of my people’: a touching and affectionate way of speaking about the city of Jerusalem. Compare Jeremiah 8:21, 9:1, Lamentations 2:11, 4:10 (plainly translated ‘my [poor] people’ in *NRSV*).
- 5–7** The siege and destruction of Jerusalem is envisaged. ‘the Lord of hosts has a day’: compare **2:11**. ‘Elam...Kir’: Isaiah came to know that Babylon, not Assyria, would be the final destroyer (see chapter **39**). Elam, beyond the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, was at that time an ally of Babylon. Kir is an unknown region, perhaps near the Caspian Sea. The picture is of armies from afar surrounding Jerusalem for the final showdown, and may have ultimate reference to something wider than just the historical Jerusalem (see **17:12–14**, **13:4–16**, Revelation 20:7–10). Though here, characteristically in this section, there is no mention of any relief.
- 8–11** The Jerusalem water supply was notoriously vulnerable under attack (see on **7:3**), and the defence measures taken by Hezekiah are well-known, and remain in part to this day (see 2 Kings 20:20, 2 Chronicles 32:2–5, 30—also written from a prophetic perspective, which sets no great store by such things). Isaiah sees these things in the context of the actions of God (**8a**, **11b**). Jerusalem is looking to these things, rather than to God and His promises and purposes concerning Jerusalem. Perhaps the very vulnerability of Jerusalem and its water supply were intended by God to engender a perpetual attitude of faith and dependence. Reliance on their own security measures achieved nothing to ensure Jerusalem’s ultimate safety in the end, and was not what saved them from the threat by Sennacherib in 701 B.C. ‘you broke down the houses to fortify the wall’: defence spending can be very costly and debilitating [\$1000 million a day worldwide (1984–85 figures). ‘For the cost of the MX missile system, 50 million malnourished children could be fed, 65,000 health care centres and 340,000 primary schools could be built.’ (*War and Peace*, Discussion Paper No. 1, Social Issues Committee, Anglican Diocese of Sydney, Anglican Information Office, 1986)].
- 12–14** Rather than exultation, there should have been repentance and turning to the LORD. Instead there was escapism into shallow pleasure and partying that sees no

future beyond the present and no reality beyond the flesh (compare 1 Corinthians 15:32). Isaiah knew personally that there can be forgiveness where there is repentance (6:5–7). To ignore God and one's own condition before him, to see no need for repentance, is the unforgivable sin. (This becomes even more sharply focussed in the presence of Jesus and our personal response to him, see Mark 3:28–30.).

Assignment Question 15

What were the people 'exultant' about in 22:1–14? What could Isaiah see that prevented him joining in their celebrations? How do you see this passage speaking to our own time?

- 15–25** An individual, a family, and the nation.
- 15–19** Shebna the steward mirrors the self-serving attitude of Israel, which trusts itself rather than the LORD. Individual judgement foreshadows the judgement that will come on the nation.
- 15** 'over the household': an important position, virtually prime minister or chancellor of the exchequer (see 2 Chronicles 26:21: 'over the king's household').
- 16** As well as surrounding himself with the trappings of power ('splendid chariots' verse **18**, compare Absalom, 2 Samuel 15:1, in the light of the warnings in Deuteronomy 17:14–16, 20:1, 1 Samuel 8:10–12), Shebna sought to make a memorial name for himself in history by preparing for himself a magnificent tomb (compare Genesis 11:4, Habakkuk 2:9, Haggai 1:2–4, 9).
- 17–18** The tomb will never be used, for Shebna will die in a foreign land, presumably as a prisoner of war at the hands of the Assyrians.
- 19–25** The fall of Shebna and the rise of Eliakim.
- 19–21** When the two next appear together in chapter **36**, Eliakim already holds Shebna's former position, and Shebna has been demoted to secretary.
- 22** In charge of everything that opens and shuts (compare Revelation 3:7).
- 23–25** Eliakim's family will move in and take advantage of his position ('nepotism'—jobs for the boys, and girls!—an abuse that is unsustainable). They will fall, and so will the nation that looks to anyone but God for its security and salvation (compare **2:22**, Jeremiah 17:5–8).

Assignment Question 16

What can we learn from 22:15–25 of the true qualities and potential perils of leadership? How does this relate to what Jesus says in eg Mark 10:35–45?

Tyre and Sidon—23:1–18

Tyre, on the coast north of Israel, was the merchant capital of the Mediterranean, with great wealth and power gained through trading by sea. Tyre had good relationships with kings David and Solomon of Israel (around 1000 B.C.) and, on a commercial basis, had helped to build the temple in Jerusalem (see 1 Kings 5:1–12, but also 1 Kings 9:10–13). However, Tyre was also a corrupting influence on Israel's religion, through the marriage of Solomon with Sidonian wives and his worship of their goddess Astarte (*RSV* Ashtoreth; 1 Kings 11:1–5, still there in the reign of Josiah 620 B.C. 2 Kings 23:13), and the evil influence of the Sidonian princess Jezebel, married to Ahab king of the northern kingdom of Israel (874–853 B.C.), who almost successfully substituted the worship of Baal for that of YHWH (1 Kings

THIS IS OUR GOD: STUDIES IN THE PROHECY OF ISAIAH

23:1–18

16, 18). Nevertheless, there is a hope that Tyre, despite its preoccupation with profit at all costs (see Amos 1:9), will have an honoured place among the nations in the enlarged Israel (Psalms 45, 87), and freely place its wealth at the disposal of God's people, as here in v. 18.

- 23:1** Tyre is mentioned by name. Despite the allusive nature of this series of oracles, these things are happening to real people.
 'Tarshish': a far-off place, possibly Tartessos in Spain, probably associated with mining and treatment of minerals, which served as a major source of Tyre's wealth.
 'Cyprus': ships on the way home learn that there is no home to return to.
- 2–3** The merchants whose trading routes reached far and wide now stand immobilised by shock and dismay.
- 4** The sea, the 'mother' of Tyre and its wealth, has been rendered childless by military invasion, and is unable to replace those who have been lost.
- 5–7** Those in the far reaches and colonists in the trading settlements who cashed in on Tyre's commercial activities are now deeply deprived, since this proud ancient power is removed.
- 8–9** All this is in the purpose of the King of kings and Lord of lords, to bring down all oppressive and self-sufficient pride.
- 10–11** Those regions held in check for the purposes of Tyre's profiteering are now released.
- 12** Reduced to the status of a refugee, Tyre now will find no place to settle.
- 13** This difficult verse could be saying that it would be Babylon, not Assyria, that finally devastated Tyre ([N]RSV, GNB). The Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar began a wearing 13-year siege in 586 B.C. (described prophetically in Ezekiel 26–28), but Tyre did not finally fall until 332 B.C. to Alexander the Great. It may make more sense to see here a prophetic reference to the Assyrian Sennacherib in Isaiah's own time laying waste to the mainland around Tyre and Sidon in 701 B.C., which did irreparable damage to Tyrian trade. So the reference here to the Chaldeans may well be saying to Tyre (as in NIV), Look at what the Assyrians are doing to Babylon (see on 21:1–10 above), and do you think you will escape?
- 14** compare verse 1. This lament brackets the oracle, reminding the Tyrians that their security will be gone.
- 15–18** 'seventy years': from 701 to the decline of Assyria in 630 B.C., Tyre remained in military and economic subjection, but then was able to reassert its former trading dominance. Isaiah predicts her return to glory, and still sees her as a 'harlot' at the financial beck and call of all the nations (compare 'Babylon' as a commercial world power in Revelation 17–18). But he also foresees a time when all her rich resources will be made available—freely this time—for the kingdom and the people of God (compare Jesus in Matthew 11:21–22).
 'dedicated to the LORD': literally 'holiness to the LORD' as in on the high priest's turban in Exodus 28:36–38 'in order that they may find favour before the LORD'. Foreshadowed in **2:2–4**, **45:14–25**, and **60:1–14**, this is finally fulfilled in Revelation 21:24–26.

Assignment Question 17

‘Her merchandise and her hire will be dedicated to the LORD’ (23:18). How does this relate to the description of Tyre as a ‘harlot’ in 23:15–17? Starting from 23:1–18, and in the light of Ezekiel 26–28, Matthew 11:20–22, 21:28–32, and Revelation 21:24–26, trace God’s dealings with Tyre.

Songs of Two Cities—The Third Series—24:1–27:13

In this series of songs Isaiah rises above the particular historical circumstances to set out the issues of world history and the place of God’s people in the course of all that. He focuses on the pictures of two cities, representing a world of human evil seeking to live from itself apart from God, and the divine gathering of God’s people.

The Desolate City and the Remnant of God’s People—24:1–20

- 24:1–3** ‘the earth’: this prophecy has to do with more than just Israel and specific nations: it sees and draws out the universal implications, and intimates the end of all things as we know them.
- 2** Every aspect of human life—religious, domestic and commercial—is under threat (compare Luke 17:26–30, 1 Corinthians 7:29–31).
- 1, 3** This will be by the word and action of the LORD.
- 4–6** The reason is given in **5b**. Human moral transgression gives rise to environmental pollution, and the creation’s repugnance at evil (see Genesis 3:17–19, Romans 8:19–23, Leviticus 18:24–30). But deeper than that is human rejection of the ‘everlasting covenant’ relationship with God that lies at the heart of God’s creative and redemptive activity, as spelled out to Noah (Genesis 9:8–17), Abraham (Psalm 105:7–11), Moses (eg Leviticus 24:5–9), David (2 Samuel 23:1–7), and with regard to the coming Messiah (**55:3**, **61:1–9**, see also Jeremiah 31:31–37, 33:19–26). This brings horrific consequences (see Leviticus 26:3–45, Deuteronomy 11:13–17, 26–28, 27:11–29:1), yet in God’s grace and faithfulness to His covenant there are still some remaining.
- 7–12** The song of the doomed city (compare **5:11–12**, **22:1–2**, **12–14**) is stilled, and its joy taken away. It is shown up as ‘the city of chaos’ (*tohu*, as in Genesis 1:2—unformed, without order, meaning, or purpose. See also the tower of Babel in Genesis 11:1–9, and Jeremiah 4:22–28). This is the ultimate progression from **13:1–22** and **21:1–10**, which is capped off in Revelation 17–18.
- 13–16a** The ‘few’ in verse **6** become a gleanings from God’s harvest, a great multitude coming in from ‘the ends of the earth’. They come to ‘give glory . . . to the name of the LORD, the God of Israel’, not to any other gods. They sing a very different song: ‘of glory to the Righteous One’. ‘The incoming remnant are primarily aware of the righteousness of the God who has saved them. In other words, his saving mercies are grounded in the satisfaction of his justice, not in the expression of his love’! (Motyer)—it is the satisfaction of the conscience that enables us to rest in His love.
- 16b** Meanwhile the prophet feels deeply in his own person the wasting effects of human treachery and sin (compare **21:3–4**, **22:4**).

THIS IS OUR GOD: STUDIES IN THE PROHECY OF ISAIAH

24:17–25:6

17–20 For the earth will be ‘rent asunder’ under the weight of human rebellion (‘transgression’ verse **20**), and there will be no escape (compare Amos 5:19, 9:1–4).

The LORD in Zion—24:21–23

- 21** Divine judgement is announced upon rebellious powers celestial and terrestrial.
22 Punishment will come ‘after many days’, so there is still a period of waiting. Compare 1 Peter 3:18–20, 2 Peter 2:4, Jude 6–7.
23 In the midst of this darkness a light appears, so brilliant as to outshine the sun and moon—it will be God Himself as King in Jerusalem! (Compare Revelation 21:22–22:5).

Assignment Question 18

What has brought about the sorry state of affairs prophetically depicted in 24:1–13, 16b–20; 21–22? What, then, are the grounds for rejoicing in 24:14–16a, 23?

The Great Feast—25:1–12

The Lord now brings the rescued nations to be His people in Zion. The ‘songs of praise, of glory to the Righteous One’ (**24:16**), that they sing as they come, are spelled out, and the glorious outcome is described. The proud self-reliance of Moab (**16:6**), and the inadequacy of Gentile collective security (**21:13–17**), of the corresponding oracles in the first two series, are replaced by the rewarded waiting for the salvation that comes from God (verse **9**).

- 25:1–5** This song begins, as did **12:1–6** (compare **6:8**), with an individual voice, which swells into the communal song of the saved.
1 ‘wonderful things, plans formed of old’: compare ‘Wonderful Counsellor’ (**9:6**)—actions of God, beyond human reach, according to God’s wisdom, which is utterly reliable (see also **44:6–8**).
2–3 This refers to the worldly ‘city of chaos’ (disorder, meaninglessness, see **24:1–12**), whose ruins the pilgrims pass through on their way to the true city of God (compare Hebrews 11:8–16, 1 Peter 1:1–5).
3 ‘strong peoples . . . cities’: should be singular. Even though they do not trust in God, the ‘strong’ and ‘ruthless’ people of this world, who have sought to make their own way without reference to God, will still be brought to respect and fear God (compare Philippians 2:10–11: ‘every knee shall bow . . . every tongue confess’).
4–5 ‘poor . . . needy’: (compare **10:1–2**) those who have been oppressed and deprived at the hands of the ruthless. God is more than equal to any kind of threat, and the raucous and fearsome song of the ruthless appears to be effortlessly stilled when God comes with relief (compare Revelation 20:7–10).
6–10a The great feast spread by the hand of God, in direct contrast with the scant fare that the nations are able to scrape together for themselves (**21:14**). Prefigured by the covenant banquet in Exodus 24:1–11.
6 ‘wine on the lees . . . well refined’: the wine is so rich and well-matured that sediment has formed, but this has been carefully filtered out.

THIS IS OUR GOD: STUDIES IN THE PROHECY OF ISAIAH

25:7–26:4

- 7–8** This is no ordinary feast, for it comes about as a result of the universal removal of death and sin, and God personally attends to healing the griefs of each individual who comes. Death as curse is removed (see Genesis 2:17, 3:19, 22–23, Romans 3:23, Hebrews 2:14–15, Revelation 21:3–4). In contrast with the cyclical Canaanite nature religions, this is a once-for-all event. This is the feast Jesus was looking to as he approached his own death and resurrection (see Matthew 26:26–29).
- 9** ‘this is our God . . . this is the LORD’: personal experience matches objective reality.
- 10a** God’s hand is on Zion for blessing.
- 10b–12** The prideful refusal of Moab to come under the secure sovereignty of the LORD (**16:6**) prefigures the destiny of all who attempt to keep themselves afloat and make their own security. This refusal matches the ‘unforgivable sin’ of **22:12–14**.

Assignment Question 19

Show how 25:6–9 relates to Exodus 24:1–11, Revelation 21:3–4 and Matthew 26:26–29. How do the other two parts of this chapter, 25:1–5 and 25:10–12, relate to 25:6–9?

The City of God—26:1–21

We now see the true city to which God will bring His people. It is clear that it has been built and secured by God Himself. So access to it is only by faith in Him. It is God who brings them into it, and who destroys the false city of self-pride. The inhabitants of the true city, in this interim time of waiting, are still aware of God’s judgements in all the earth, the strong resistance of those who refuse God’s way of faith, and their own ineffectiveness in the face of all this. They look to God’s promised victory over death to bring life even to the lifeless peoples of the doomed city. Meanwhile they count themselves secure in God as the final judgment is unrolled.

- 26:1** ‘strong city’: not just for the time being, but literally ‘a city of strength’—as a foundational attribute. This because it is God who ‘sets up salvation’ as its surrounds and defences.
- 2–4** ‘righteous’: not those who are sinlessly perfect (see verses **16, 18**), but those who are in a right relationship with God by faith in what God has done, is doing and will do (compare Genesis 15:5–6, hence **7:4, 9b, 28:16, 30:15**, and Habakkuk 2:4, Romans 1:17, 3:20–30, 4:1–25, Galatians 3:6–14, Hebrews 10:35–11:40). So access to the true city of God and participation in its life is fully and simply by this faith.
- ‘faith’: literally ‘faiths’, implying amplitude and fullness.
- ‘perfect peace’: literally ‘peace peace’—thoroughgoing, as distinct from false or disturbed peace (compare **57:19**, contrast **57:21**, Jeremiah 6:14, 8:11).
- ‘mind’: signifies mindset or whole attitude in life (contrast Genesis 6:5). Hence repentance in the New Testament is the Greek *metanoia*, literally a ‘change of mind’ or heart attitude in life.
- ‘stayed’: a constant steady purposefulness which is an attribute of God (Psalm 111:7–8 ‘established’) and a gift to human creatures (Psalm 112:6–8). Even the staying of our mind on God comes and is sustained from Him rather than from

THIS IS OUR GOD: STUDIES IN THE PROHECY OF ISAIAH

26:4–21

- ourselves. For in Him is ‘an everlasting rock’—He is the essence of dependable steadiness of purpose.
- 5–6** ‘the lofty city’: compare **2:12–17, 24:10, 25:2**—the world organised without or in opposition to God. Isaiah is now talking almost wholly in principles rather than geographical locations.
‘poor...needy’: (see **25:4–5**) here emphasising the inability of those made victorious by God to wreak this victory for themselves.
- 7–9** Still in the world, though not of it (compare John 17:14–15) the righteous-by-faith know that it is God’s own righteousness that enables them to walk in this way of right relationship towards the goal for which they long (compare Psalms 63:1, 107:4–7).
‘judgements’: (verses 8, 9) may mean God’s commands and pronouncements, or God’s moral actions, or both. As the people of God live according to God’s commandments, or submit to God’s disciplinary actions, there is a powerful witness in the earth.
- 10–11a** The refusal of the wicked to know God (see **6:9–10, Romans 1:18**): God shows them favour (as in Matthew 5:45), and they do not learn (Romans 1:21–22); God is straightforward with them, and they seek perverse ways (as in Ecclesiastes 7:29, Titus 1:15), God performs His mighty actions, and they do not see (Luke 16:31).
- 11b** ‘Let them see’: possibly better translated ‘They will see...!’ (as in Philippians 2:10–11, Matthew 25:30—the final clear distinction between God’s people and God’s enemies, as in 2 Thessalonians 1:5–10). Isaiah personally knows what that ‘fire’ can do: **6:6–7**.
- 12** The righteous-by-faith know that salvation and all that follows from it is of the Lord, and they themselves are incapable of it. Compare John 3:27, 21.
- 13–15** ‘other lords’: other governing nations, and their idols, against whom God has won great victories in Israel’s history, such as Egypt, Philistia, Edom, Ammon, and Assyria. The one who does something is the one who gets the glory for it—in this case God alone, for the sake of His own name (see Ezekiel 36:22–23).
- 16–18** At the same time, God’s people are painfully aware of God’s needful judgements upon them, and of their own ineffectiveness, in that, despite their calling and promised potential, they have made little headway in helping to bring the ungodly to their senses.
‘poured out a prayer’: has the sense of barely being able to whisper (compare Romans 8:26). Recalls the time of the Judges.
- 19** Yet there is hope that God will bring even those nations under judgement into His light and life. This verse most likely refers back to the inhabitants of the doomed ‘lofty city’ in verses **5–6**. It may refer figuratively to new birth (as in John 3:3–10, Ephesians 2:1–10). But in the light of God’s defeat of death at the world-wide gathering of **25:6–9**, it also looks towards full bodily resurrection (compare Job 19:25–27, Daniel 12:2, John 5:24–29, 8:51, 11:25–26, Luke 20:27–38, Acts 23:6–8, 1 Corinthians 15, 2 Corinthians 5:1–5, Revelation 20:11–15).
- 20–21** ‘shut your doors’: contrast verse **2** ‘open your gates’. God’s people are to be secured during the final judgement and exposure of all evil by God, which here has overtones of the Flood (Genesis 7:1, 16) and the Passover in Egypt (Exodus 12:12, 22–23).

‘iniquity’: inward secret sins. ‘blood shed’: outward flagrant crimes. All will be exposed, and ‘the earth’, God’s structurally sound creation, will no longer be able to keep it hidden, but will actively co-operate with God’s morally purposive action (as in **1:2–3**, **24:5** Leviticus 18:24–30).

Assignment Question 20

Trace how 26:1–21 signals the end of human ‘do-it-yourself’ salvation in favour of the salvation that comes only from God, and relate this to something of your own life experience.

The Final Gathering—27:1–13

We come now to the final song in the third of the three series of oracles that began in **13:1**. As in the companion oracles (see **19:24–25** and **23:18**), this closes in **27:12–13** with a prophecy of the gathering in of God’s people from as far afield as Mesopotamia and Egypt.

27:1 ‘Leviathan the fleeing serpent’: pictured as a monster flying through the air; ‘Leviathan the twisting serpent’: pictured as a snake coiling on the earth; and ‘the dragon that is in the sea’: the monster of the deep. Compare **24:21–22**, where God brings punishment upon the natural and supernatural forces in heaven and earth. ‘Leviathan’ (see Job 3:8) signifies the dark and unruly powers that seek to disrupt and destroy, over which we have no control. For the land-lubber Israelites—see 1 Kings 9:26–28, 22:48–49—and in Canaanite mythology) this was symbolised particularly by all that is unknown and threatening about the sea (though seafarers themselves are no less wary of the ‘dragons of the deep’). The fact that there are such ‘monsters’ as the hippopotamus and the crocodile (which is how ‘Behemoth’ and ‘Leviathan’ are sometimes translated in Job 40 and 41) feed these conceptions. But their knowledge of God’s control over the waters in creation (Genesis 1:2, 6–10, Psalm 104:5–9, Job 38:8–11, Psalm 107:23–32), and in their rescue from Egypt (Psalm 74:12–14, **51:9–10**), enabled them to see these dark and horrific forces as not more than a part of God’s creation, fully subject to the Creator-Redeemer (Psalm 104:24–26, Job 40–41), and objects, as here, of his ultimate conquest. Here identified with the ‘serpent’ of Genesis 3:1–15, and so with Satan and his minions in Revelation 12–20. See further Ephesians 2:2, Luke 22:3, 53, Colossians 2:13–15, Revelation 10:1–3. The upshot of this verse is the defeat of all rebellious powers, whether in the sky, on earth, or in the sea (see 1 Cor. 15:24–28).

2–6 The song of the vineyard—compare **5:1–7**.

2 ‘In that day’: this is now the end-time, when a restored Eden fills the whole earth. ‘A pleasant vineyard’: compare **5:1**: ‘on a very fertile hill’.

3 ‘keeper . . . water it . . . guard it’: compare **5:2**. God holds nothing back in His loving-care for His people.

4 ‘I have no wrath’: contrast **5:2c–7**. All wrath is now ended, and its purposes achieved. Compare **40:2**, Galatians 3:13–14, Romans 8:1–4.

4–5 ‘thorns and briars’: God would still be willing to take on any enemies in the cause of His people. (See also Genesis 3:17–18, Matthew 27:29.) Yet even these fierce and hurtful enemies may come and take refuge in the living God (as Moab could

THIS IS OUR GOD: STUDIES IN THE PROHECY OF ISAIAH

27:5–13

- have in **16:4–5**) and be at peace with Him—such is His appeal and the power of His redemption.
- 6** Thus Israel as God’s people will encompass all nations and fill the earth with fruitfulness (compare Psalms 67, 87).
- 7–11** God explains how this will come about: through a wonderful removal of sin (compare **25:7–8**) and a devastating victory over the evil world-city (see **24**).
- 7–8** God has never dealt with Israel as fiercely as He has with Israel’s enemies (eg Egypt at the Red Sea, or Assyria in **37:36**). He has never made a full end of Israel, as He well might have. Instead He has used the scattering of exile and captivity to discipline them strongly.
- 9** This is an instance of God’s forbearance, which is given to lead to repentance (see 2 Peter 3:9). God’s forbearance is not to be confused with God’s forgiveness, which can only come about by a full atonement being made. But God’s forbearance, as here, leads us on to God’s total forgiveness, ‘the guilt of Jacob will be expiated . . . the removal of his sin’ (see Romans 3:23–26), and can be for us a sure sign of its coming (as in 2 Peter 3:15).
- 9b** This will be the end of false worship—of false ways of seeking God’s strength and favour—for God’s own way of bringing His favour and strength to us judges them all. Indeed, once full atonement has been made, sacrifices of any kind will not be necessary for this purpose, and altar stones will become a redundant item.
- 10-11** ‘fortified city’: people’s attempts to secure themselves in the alternative evil world city have come to nothing, as deserted ruins, where even the trees do not survive. This matches the barrenness of hearts that have refused to see and accept God’s true way of repentance and forgiveness unto life, and so have placed themselves outside the mercy of the One who formed them of clay and breathed His life into them (see Genesis 2:7, 2 Thessalonians 1:6–10).
- 12–13** Compare **19:23–25**.
- 12** ‘from the river Euphrates to the Brook of Egypt’: the boundaries of the land promised to Abraham’s descendants (Genesis 15:18) and occupied by David.
- 13** ‘trumpet’: as on the day of Jubilee, for release from slavery and return to homelands.
 ‘land of Assyria . . . land of Egypt’: from beyond the borders of Israel, the extent of the known world, to include Gentile nations, even from the lands of the past and present oppressors of God’s people.
 ‘lost . . . driven’: the harassed and helpless sheep are brought to the fold of Israel (as in Ezekiel 34:12, Matthew 9:36–37, John 10:16, Ephesians 3:4–6).

Assignment Question 21

How does 27:2–6 relate to 5:1–7? What is its place in the overall victory described in chapter 27? What is the necessary heart of this victory, and what is its fruit?

GOD ACTING IN HISTORY—28:1–37:38

After a section in which Isaiah has made some amazing predictions which would have seemed most improbable to his hearers—that the great and oppressive imperial powers of Egypt and Assyria will end up as part of God’s people (**19:24–25, 27:13**)—the prophet now sets out ways in which his predictions were strikingly fulfilled, in an interim way, in their own time, by the direct action of God. This is to encourage the hearers in hope regarding the more far-reaching aspects of Isaiah’s prophecy. (Just as in our own day we could point to the remarkable and unexpected collapse of Soviet communism, in answer to many decades of concerned prayer, to encourage belief in God’s sovereignty over all human affairs now, and in the ages to come.) We have already seen other specific prophecies which served in this same way, relating to Assyria **14:24–27**, Moab **16:13–14**, Egypt **20:1–6**, Kedar **21:16–17**, Shebna and Eliakim **22:15–25**, Tyre **23:17**. God never leaves Himself without prophetic witness (see Amos 3:7)! The broad principles are set out in chapters **28–29**. In **30–32** Egypt and Assyria are mentioned by name, and placed side by side with the coming kingdom of the Messiah. In **33–35**, these specific acts of God set the pattern for God’s saving actions in the end-time, and in **36–37** the actual historical fulfilment is related as grounds for present hope in these promises yet to come.

The ‘Sure Foundation’—28:1–29

- 28:1–6** A prophecy relating to the destruction of Samaria and the northern kingdom of Israel (‘Ephraim’ verse **1**), which happened in 721 B.C. in Isaiah’s own day (see 2 Kings 18:9–12, 17:6–23) is generalised to show the replacement of false pride and indulgence with God’s true trust and rule.
- 1** ‘Woe’: compare **6:5**. The first in another series of six ‘woes’ (**28:1, 29:1, 15, 30:1, 31:1, 33:1** (compare **5:8–23**—things are still the same).
- 1, 3** ‘proud crown’: Ephraim’s false and complacent trust in its own self-sufficient predominance; contrast verses **5–6**, where the LORD Himself and His rule is the true trust and dependability.
‘drunkards...overcome with wine’: pride and complacency give rise to irresponsible over-indulgence—as was the case before the fall of Samaria (see Amos 6:1–8).
‘fading flower’: the party is over.
- 2** ‘one who is mighty and strong’: Assyria is not mentioned here by name, as Isaiah sets out the general principles of God’s actions in history. Prideful complacent revelry is swept away as in a flood (eg literally in Katherine, Northern Territory, Australia in 1998).
- 3–4** ‘like a first-ripe fig’: the way the new-season fruit is gobbled up. Behind this may also be the reminder that the first-fruits belong to God (Deuteronomy 26:1–11)—emphasising this again as an action of God.
- 5–6** God is the true ‘crown’ of His people—their true trust and dependency—and His rule is just and right. The perishable wreath is replaced by the imperishable (compare 1 Corinthians 8:25, 15:50–58).
‘him who sits in judgement’: a hint of the coming king, who rules with a right judgement in all things (**11:1–5**).

THIS IS OUR GOD: STUDIES IN THE PROHECY OF ISAIAH

28:7–20

- ‘the gate’: the place of judgement, and the focus of the city’s defences in war.
- 7–8** As in Ephraim before the fall of Samaria, so also in Jerusalem in Isaiah’s day (see **5:11–12, 21–23, 22:8–14**), those who rule and make decisions are swallowed up (‘confused’) by what they swallow, and prophets and priests are incapable of giving a clear word and right judgement.
- 9–10** Isaiah is scorned by these drunken leaders for the elementary simplicity of his message (see on **6:9–10** above)—like teaching ABC to kindergarten children. In keeping with his commission, Isaiah is simply setting forth repeatedly in a systematic way the truths of God’s revelation. Their repetition in the Hebrew mocks it to sound a bit like ‘goo-gar’ baby talk.
- 11–13** So, if they will not understand and accept what is quite plain, then they will be taught a lesson—through the unintelligible language of foreign invaders coming upon them in judgement!
(Quoted by Paul in 1 Corinthians 14:21–25, in a discussion on the use of ‘tongues’, where, consistent with Isaiah, he draws a distinction between those who want to hear, to whom the word comes prophetically, and those who refuse to hear, to whom the word comes in judgement as unintelligible sounds.)
‘rest...repose’: Isaiah’s consistent call to faith and trust in God and His promises as the nation’s true security, even in the midst of the pressures of international politics, is the message they have been mocking and denying. (Compare Matthew 11:29.)
- ‘backward’: contrary to their thinking, this is not the way of progress.
- 14–22** Their political alliances will be broken against the sure rock of faith in God and His promises.
- 15** ‘covenant with death’: a veiled reference to their attempted alliance and security pact with Egypt against Assyria. Would they have called it that? Probably not, any more than they would have admitted to ‘lies’ and ‘falsehood’. They certainly felt that this alliance would secure them against the ravages of conquest and death. Yet in reality it was the signing of their own death warrant.
- 16** A key verse in Isaiah about the way of trust, relating to God’s promises concerning Jerusalem as the place of His habitation, and the royal house of David as the eternal guarantee. As in **7:4, 9**, see also **30:15**.
(Taken up in the New Testament, in connection with Zechariah 3:9 and Psalm 118:22–23, with reference to Jesus Christ: Romans 9:31–33, 10:9–11, 1 Corinthians 3:11, 1 Peter 2:4–8. See also **8:13–14**, Mark 12:9–11.)
‘foundation’: still hidden underground (compare 2 Corinthians 5:7).
‘haste’: panic, rushing around. (Compare Luke 10:38–42.)
- 17** ‘justice...righteousness’: against which injustice and unrighteousness are seen to be deficient and wrong.
‘hail...waters’: compare **28:2, 8:6–8**.
- 18–19** Compare verse **15**: their security pact will no longer preserve them from death. Day after day its worthlessness will be shown up. Unlike the time of the Passover, it will afford them no protection by day or by night.
‘message’: compare verse **9**. They have foolishly exchanged a message of rest for a message of terror.
- 20** If you make your own bed (as an alternative resting-place) you must lie in it. But all our own efforts give rise to nightmarish inadequacy.

THIS IS OUR GOD: STUDIES IN THE PROHECY OF ISAIAH

28:21–29:1

- 21** ‘Perazim . . . Gibeon’: the site of great victories by David over the Philistines—see 1 Chronicles 14:8–17.
 ‘strange . . . alien’: by contrast, the LORD will now be turning against His people, rather than fighting for them.
 (Even more strange and alien is God’s work in the cross, by which He withholds not His own Son, and lays our iniquity on Him—see **53:6, 10**, Romans 8:32, 1 Corinthians 1:23.)
- 22** If they persist in their mocking, they will lock themselves into that bondage, and succumb to the coming destruction. Even so, this is an appeal for even the scoffers to desist and come to repentance. Not to prevent the calamity, for it is already decreed, but as the only way to prepare for it (compare Psalm 2:10–11).
- 23–29** The chapter began as a prophecy concerning Ehpraim/Israel and its capital Samaria, destroyed by the Assyrian Army in 721 B.C., but with the implication that Judah and Jerusalem were in a similar condition. These verses possibly address the question as to whether the same fate will befall Jerusalem at this time? The answer is given in an oblique way, that emphasises the appropriateness of all God’s sovereign actions in history.
- 23** Words of wisdom are to follow—compare eg Proverbs 1:20–23 (addressed to ‘scoffers’; compare v. **14**).
- 24–25** Ploughing (= the action of judgement) is not an end in itself, but is with a view to the crop and the harvest. The farmer knows what he is doing—and so does God.
- 26** Yet it is not that God is like the farmer: it is the farmer who has learned or discovered all this from God, revealing Himself in His creation (see Romans 1:19–20).
- 27–28** All grain has to go through the threshing process, but there is an appropriate and measured treatment for each kind of grain.
- 29** Again, this displays the nature of God, the ‘Wonderful Counsellor’ (**9:6**). The implication, in answer to the question, is that God will do exactly what is fitting for Jerusalem, according to His wise purposes of holy love.

Assignment Question 22

Chapter 28 is addressed to leaders in Israel. What are the traps they have fallen into, and what lessons can we learn from this for present-day leadership in church, or state, or business?

Judgement and deliverance in Zion—29:1–24

- 29:1–8** These verses clearly bring to mind the events of chapters **36–37**, the siege of Jerusalem by Sennacherib in 701 B.C. and the last-minute deliverance, and so may have originated in a prophecy a year or two before that. But in the present setting these events are nowhere mentioned by name. Rather, Isaiah is once again setting forth principles by which God acts towards His people.
- 1** ‘Ariel’: ‘hearth of God’, referring to the altar of sacrifice in the sanctuary, where the fire burned continually. The place where the animal, representing the sinful offerer, is burned up (see **33:14**), and, as such, the place of grace and favour to

THIS IS OUR GOD: STUDIES IN THE PROHECY OF ISAIAH

29:1-14

- the released and forgiven sinner. Isaiah personally knew it as both (6:4-7). Here it is a fitting cryptic allusion to Jerusalem ('Zion' verse 7).
- 'year to year . . . feasts': the passage of time, and the routine celebration of the religious festivals will not stave off the impending judgement.
- 2-3** The siege of the city and the distress it causes will be God's own action against it (compare 2 Chronicles 36:15-21. See also **10:5-15**, Acts 2:23). In every event we are personally confronted by God. Motyer: 'We live by faith, not by working the system'!
- 'like an Ariel': a place where the consuming fire of God's holy love burns—in judgement and deliverance (see verses **5-8**).
- 4** This calls forth prayer, however weak and feeble (compare Psalm 130:1, Romans 8:26-27, **37:14-20**).
- 5-8** Deliverance comes from the Lord in a sudden and by no means uncertain manner. (Compare **37:36-38**, but also the constant use of 'immediately' in Mark's gospel, and the final denouement in Revelation 20:7-10.)
- 6** Expressions of God's supreme control over all the elements of His creation, and of His great power.
- 7** The fearsome threat becomes like a dream to those who were threatened.
- 8** The purposes and ambitions of the threatening powers become like a lost dream to the threatening powers. God and His purposes are the true waking reality.
- 9-14** Physical judgement and deliverance of the city (verses **1-8**) is now paralleled by spiritual judgement and deliverance. Remember **6:9-10**: the repetition of the message from God to those who do not want to hear and obey it may precipitate the final hardening of hearts against it. Thus this is an action of God through His word. Those who have lived through a mighty act of God in history still may not see it as such, and will come up with their own alternative explanation. Yet even from this parlous condition the Lord undertakes to deliver them.
- 9** In **28:7** their confusion and inability to discern the words and actions of God were brought about by over-indulgence in wine. Here the root cause is identified as something deeper: a determination not to see or understand. The second half of the verse should read: 'they are drunk . . . they do stagger'.
- 10** Those who by their own choice refuse to hear or see will in God's judgement be made incapable of seeing and hearing. (Compare 1 Kings 22:1-23, where God sends a lying spirit into the false prophets to tell Ahab what he much prefers to hear and so to entice him to his death.)
- 11-12** So the message has become like a sealed book handed to two types of people: those who can read, and cannot be bothered opening it, and those who cannot read, and cannot be bothered trying to learn how to.
- 13** Compare Matthew 15:1-9, where Jesus quotes this verse. Formal religion and morality can be a deadly way of keeping oneself at arm's length from God.
- 14** God's 'wonderful and marvellous' deliverance from this terrible state entails first of all the removal and rendering ineffective of the alternative human explanations and understandings. This in itself is a great liberation, though a highly unsettling one. This is enlarged upon in the next 'woe', verses **15-24**.

*THIS IS OUR GOD: STUDIES IN THE PROHECY OF ISAIAH***29:15–24**

- 15–24** God’s ‘marvellous’ works against those who seek to make their own arrangements in life apart from God, against the blindness and deafness that entails, and the injustices that issue from it, will amazingly issue in wisdom and teachableness.
- 15** Although they probably would not see it this way themselves, those who habitually live as if they are accountable only to themselves are depicted as being intent on attempting to hide themselves in the dark from the all-seeing eye of the LORD.
- 16** In this they are reversing the role and position of the creature and the Creator, as the creature denies or passes judgement on the Creator (a perennial phenomenon, compare Jeremiah 18:1–12, Romans 9:20–21). God’s position, creative action and wisdom are all called into question.
- 17** Regardless of this, God’s actions will cause a complete turn-around. What is regarded as wild and natural will be transformed into a garden, compared with which the results of cultivation by human hands will be regarded as a wilderness. So God’s renewal of the whole creation (see Romans 8:19–23, Revelation 21:5) will far outshine all human efforts to create our own ‘Eden’.
- 18** Contrast verses **9–11**. The judgement of inability to see or understand will be reversed.
- 19–21** The fortunes of the humiliated and needy (compare **10:2**) are reversed over against those who have oppressed them by pitiless and scornful evil intent, and in false manipulation of the justice system by false accusation, intimidation of witnesses, and groundless judgement. Legal processes sometimes are only as good as publicly-held values. But here the practitioners of false justice will be no more, and their victims will have cause for great joy and exultation in God.
- 22–23** Harking back to the time when God ‘bailed out’ Abraham from the wrong ways of the nations into covenant-relationship with God, the LORD now gets Israel to look towards its fulfilment. The patriarch Jacob, fearfully grieving over his wayward offspring, is pictured as being heartened to see them now bringing glory to the holy name of God and honouring Him in their midst, for the awesome work of salvation by which He has caused them to be there with Him.
- 24** And what appeared to be an intractable judgement on those who were spirited and complaining in their opposition to God will be removed and transformed into godly wisdom and teachableness. Isaiah does not say here how this will come about, simply that God will do it. But see eg Ephesians 5:8, 1 Corinthians 2:12–13, Acts 17:11.

Assignment Question 23

Chapter 29 speaks of both judgement and deliverance in Zion. What issues are addressed, and how are they resolved? What light does this throw on the overall plan of God? Reflect on your own experience of church life in the light of this.

The reliability of God—30:1–33

After setting out the broad principles in chapters 28–29, Isaiah now addresses the specific instances of the alliance with Egypt (30:1–7), and the Assyrian invasion (30:27–33). Between these, he speaks of Judah’s refusal to hear God’s word, and the consequences of that (30:8–

THIS IS OUR GOD: STUDIES IN THE PROHECY OF ISAIAH

30:1–15

17), and at the same time reiterates God's gracious promises regarding the time to come (30:18–26).

30:1–7 Israel seeking an alliance with Egypt (see also chapters **19–20**).

1 'Woe': the fourth of six 'woes' (see at **28:1**)

'rebellious children [lit. sons]': harks back to **1:2**.

'a plan, but not mine': compare Proverbs 16:25, also 1–3, 9. Not from God.

'a league [better: a covering], but not of my spirit': not under God's protective covering. These two failings, in the face of God's word to the contrary, are seen as a deliberate setting out to 'add sin to sin'.

2 The abandoning of God for—of all places—Egypt!

3 For what happened when Israel was last in Egypt? Slavery and genocide.

4–5 Pharaoh's machinery of government may look impressive and strong, but there is nothing there that can bring any advantage—only shameful loss and defeat.

6–7 Why 'the beasts of the Negeb'? These are the poor pack-asses and camels, laden with Israel's wasted money that will bring no return from useless Egypt. The delegation's attempt at secrecy, by avoiding the main route, ironically means they retrace the route of the exodus, through the harsh and hostile wilderness. What a reversal!

'Rahab' (see on **27:1** and **51:9–11**): the toothless dragon already defeated by God.

8–17 This ill-advised attempt to curry favour with Egypt against Assyria is symptomatic of Israel's deeper problem: the refusal to hear the word of the LORD, and to trust Him in his covenant promises. Once again (as in **6:9–13**) Isaiah is to make this, and its consequences, inescapably clear.

8 Perhaps referring to the message to come in verses **12–15**, the 'tablet' is a public placarding of the announcement, and the 'book' is a record for the future. Being a prophetic word from God, it will not only be proved true in the immediate future; it will also have significance beyond the prophet's own time (which is why we are reading it now!) and into eternity, 'as a witness for ever'.

9 'rebellious children, lying sons': compare **1:2, 20; 30:1**.

10–11 Isaiah parodies their unspoken attitudes: refusing to hear the prophetic word, they seek out a message that they think will keep things going smoothly as they are—trifling things that make no moral demands (compare 2 Timothy 4:3–4).

'the Holy One of Israel': it is the holiness of God, at the heart of Isaiah's experience and message, at which they take deepest offence.

12 The one whose word they have despised is the very one they must now hear from. Note that the alternative to trust and reliance on the LORD is trust and reliance on oppression and perverseness—the outcome of all humanly-devised morality.

13 Judgement comes from within: the unsustainable nature of what they have attempted.

14 It also comes from outside: the Lord's determined and fierce opposition to that which will not profit the ones He loves.

15 Isaiah's central message of faith (see **7:9; 28:16**), which they have rejected, is reiterated from the same Holy One of Israel.

THIS IS OUR GOD: STUDIES IN THE PROHECY OF ISAIAH

30:16–25

- 16** Their resort to the alternative—military action—will turn out very differently from how they expect. Thinking to pursue their enemies, they will find themselves pursued! (Compare Matthew 26:52.)
- 17** The covenant blessing of Leviticus 26:8 is reversed, and the curse of Deuteronomy 32:30 comes true.
‘flagstaff...signal’: signs of people who have been here but are no more. The nation has come to an end.
- 18–26** After such a total and dismal failure of human-based enterprise, we might expect to hear, ‘And fair enough too.’ But, typical of Isaiah and the God he speaks from, it is into this condition of total failure that God speaks his message of promise and hope, and out of it He brings his reality of victory and restoration.
- 18** ‘Therefore’: following verses **13–14** and **17**. Not ‘in spite of this’. God’s actions in judgement are always with a view to His gracious, just and merciful purpose of great blessing, and of a piece with it. So the fact that God is taking the trouble to bring judgement is a sure sign that its recipients are well and truly in His sights for blessing, and are on their way to it. The fact that God finds it necessary to bring judgement at this time means that He must wait to bring the coming blessing until the judgement is complete, and the faithful must wait with Him (compare **8:17**, where the faithful remnant wait trustfully through a time of disfavour and darkness).
‘justice’: exactly the right decision and action at the appropriate time.
- 19** ‘people in Zion’: those who have held to the foundation stone in **28:16**. In the promised time there will be no more weeping and no more waiting: the answers to prayer will be ever-present and immediate.
- 20** In the meantime, adversity and affliction are their food and drink. In that time their food and drink will be prosperous and abundant (verse **23**). Both are from the Lord.
‘will not hide himself’: the time of disfavour will be over for ever. The revelation of God will be fully before them.
- 21** The time of refusal to hear will also be over. There will be a voice behind as well as vision before. Speaking and hearing will be immediate, according to need. Direction will still be needed: the redeemed remain potential sinners, no less dependent on God than they have ever been, but now gladly so, and wonderfully preserved by Him from all danger and sin.
- 22** The response to this is the total renunciation, in abhorrence and detestation, of their former attachment to idols, for that which is so much better: adoration of God alone Compare 1 Thessalonians 1:9; Acts 19:18–20.
- 23–24** Spiritual blessings of verses **20–21** are matched by physical blessings also, as the curse is lifted off the creation, and the other creatures participate freely in the benefits of the ‘liberty of the glory of the children of God’ (see Romans 8:19–21).
- 25** At the time of God’s victory over all that is ‘lifted up and high’ (**2:17**) in the worldly ‘city of chaos’ (**24:10; 25:2**), there will springs of flowing water even on the peaks of the arid mountains, that were previously defiled by false worship (compare Ezekiel 6; 36:1–12).

*THIS IS OUR GOD: STUDIES IN THE PROHECY OF ISAIAH***30:26–31:2**

- 26** ‘the hurt’ brought about internally by their own sin, and ‘the wounds’ inflicted by the LORD in righteous judgement, are now fully healed by Him who shines in glory more brightly than sun or moon (compare **24:23**; Revelation 21:23; 22:5).
- 27–33** As a foretaste of this, and as a demonstration of the Lord’s sovereignty over all nations and happenings in the present age, the threat of Assyria, despite the failure of Israel’s fearful and faithless seeking of the Egyptian alliance against it, will be brought to nought (as in chapters **36–37**).
- 27–28** A series of powerful images, reminiscent of the time of the exodus but going far beyond it, denote God’s holy nature and character as the righteous and thoroughgoing judge of the nations in the interests of His chosen people.
- 29** The gladness and celebration, surpassing even that of the passover, of the people who seek the LORD as their one security, lie at the centre of His purposes.
- 30** The punishment of Assyria (see **10:15–19**) will be no less fierce than the plagues which came upon Egypt at the time of the exodus.
- 31** This will be the shattering of the power of Assyria.
- 32** The one who was the rod in the hand of God against Israel (see **10:5–6**) will himself come under God’s beating, while the people see it and rejoice.
- 33** Indeed, the king of Assyria, in coming up to Jerusalem, is unknowingly coming to his own funeral pyre, which has long been prepared, and will be ignited, by the Ruler of all the ages.

Assignment Question 24

Chapter 30 brings together an attempted alliance with Egypt (v. 1–7), and the Assyrian invasion (27–33). It speaks of Judah’s refusal to hear the word of God (8–17), and also of the age to come (18–26). At its heart (v. 15) is Isaiah’s message of faith. Show how these parts relate to each other, and draw conclusions which could be helpful to us today.

Rescue, Repentance and Renewal—31:1–32:20

These two chapters speak of transformation as a work of God. It includes putting paid to false help and establishing the true help, the turning of hearts to God, the defeat of enemies, the rule of a king in righteousness and justice, and the despoiling and renewing of the earth.

- 31:1–5** False help and true help.
- 1** The fifth ‘woe’. Faced with the threat of Assyria, the temptation was to form an alliance with Egypt (see chapters **19–20**, **30:1–7**).
‘horses...chariots...horsemen’: the doomed strength of Egypt (Exodus 14:6, 9), about which Israel should have known better (see Deuteronomy 17:16)! The God who conquered Egypt, who has called them to rely on Him alone, present in their midst, is not even consulted.
- 2** ‘he is wise’: God’s wisdom is very different from that of those who consider themselves wise in the ways of worldly security (compare 1 Corinthians 1:17–2:16). In this instance, the wisest thing to do is to bring disaster on such ill-considered and ill-fated plans.

THIS IS OUR GOD: STUDIES IN THE PROHECY OF ISAIAH

31:2–32:18

- ‘his words’: true to His covenant promise, God judges the wicked and perverse foolishness of those who do not take Him at his word, and any help they may seek that is not Himself.
- 3** Humans and the creatures they rely on are flesh, needing to be enlivened (as in Genesis 2:7); God is spirit, and the One from whom all life comes (see John 4:24, 6:63). A movement of God’s hand will bring both Judah and Egypt, in their unholy alliance, to an end.
- 4** ‘the LORD said to me’: a significant utterance.
 ‘As a lion’: despite the shouting of the despised Egyptian ‘shepherds’, nothing will deter God from seizing Zion as his prey.
 ‘fight upon’: really means fight against, as in **29:1–4**. (Compare 1 Peter 4:17.)
- 5** ‘Like birds hovering’: by sudden contrast, as in **29:5–8**, the picture changes to God’s subsequent promised deliverance.
- 6–9** Repentance and rescue from the Assyrian foe.
- 6** The appropriate preparation for this promised deliverance is a turning to God as profound as their turning away has been despicable. (Compare Matthew 3:1–3.)
- 7** Compare **30:22**. On comparison with **2:19–20**, this must refer to ‘the day of the LORD’, the eschatological event. Whatever we are faced with in the present, the ultimate question of where we stand before God is primary.
- 8–9** But as always in the Scripture, the ‘day of the Lord’ is always in close association with the immediate crisis (compare Mark 13:5–37). The destruction of the Assyrian threat is predicted, as it actually happened in chapters **36–37**.
- 9** ‘fire...furnace’: (compare Hebrews 12:29) Israel is ‘indwelt by the God of fiery holiness’ (Motyer). Neither Jerusalem nor its enemies can escape the implications of that.
- 32:1–8** The new king and his transformed people. Compare **9:1–7**, **11:1–10**.
- 1** ‘righteousness’ is the inner principle, ‘justice’ is the outworking practice. Note that the king does not rule alone (compare Daniel 7:14, 18, 22).
- 2** ‘each’: could refer to the princes, or singly to the king. There is protection from every danger, and refreshing provision for every need.
- 3–4** Contrast **29:9–11**. This would be nothing short of a miracle.
- 5–8** Compare **31:2**: true godly wisdom will prevail.
 ‘fool’: the one who sits loose to moral and spiritual values (as in Psalm 53).
 ‘knave/scoundrel’: works with devious deception to promote his own advantage at the expense of others. A society of fools gives rise to many scoundrels. But God will bring transformation to both.
- 9–14** Compare 3:18–4:1. The complacent women, who presume that their ill-founded security will always remain undisturbed, are called to account. Their fondness for the fruit of the vine will be visited by deprivation, and the loss of beauty, society, and all home comforts, to be replaced with shame, captivity, and wasted desolation. Verb forms are masculine, perhaps indicating that the attitudes adopted by the women are shared by all.
- 15–18** The gift of true Spirit from God (refer **31:3**) ushers in the contrasting transformation of the creation (compare **29:17**) and its inhabitants, and a return to

THIS IS OUR GOD: STUDIES IN THE PROHECY OF ISAIAH

32:18–33:7

the abiding covenant relationship of faith that lies at the heart of Isaiah's message (verse 17, refer 7:9b, 28:16, 30:15, brought about by the righteousness and just action of God (ultimately fulfilled as in Romans 3:21–26, 5:1–11!).

- 18 'My people': those who have responded to the call of 31:6 and 32:9, of repentance and hearing the word of the Lord.
- 19–20 The fall and the rising of many (see Luke 2:34).
- 19 Compare 2:9–19, 10:18–19, 33–34, 24:10, 26:5–6.
- 20 Compare 30:23–25. The blessing of God, bringing fulfilment and the enjoyment of timely right action.

Assignment Question 25

'He is wise and brings disaster' (31:2). Examine in chapters 31–32 the themes of judgement, deliverance, repentance, defeat, true rule, despoiling and renewal, and show how all these are necessary in God's work of transformation.

God's Saving Action in the End-time—33:1–35:10

In this over-all section on God acting in history (chapters 28–37), chapters 28–29 have set out the broad principles, and 30–32 have specified God's action with regard to Egypt and Assyria in Isaiah's day, and linked this with the coming kingdom of the Messiah. On the basis of this, chapters 33–35 set out God's saving actions in the end-time. Zion is saved from the destroyer to be filled with the Lord's goodness in 33:1–6, and the judgement of the peoples follows in verses 7–12. 33:13–24 and 34:1–17 are declarations to the whole earth concerning Zion and her king, and the final overthrow of all the nations. Chapter 35 is a wonderful prophecy of the restoration of the whole creation and the return of the redeemed to Zion.

- 33:1–12 Destruction and salvation.
- 1 'destroyer...treacherous one': Assyria's ruthlessness and unscrupulousness (see 2 Kings 18:13–18) is seen as the model of what will happen to all such peoples in the end: they will more than meet their match.
- 2 Meanwhile the faithful look to the One who alone is their strength and safety day by day.
- 3–4 For at the movement of the Lord, the threat of opposing nations will be dispersed, and the 'battle' will be over almost as soon as it has begun (compare Revelation 19:19–20).
- 5–6 This rousing action of the Lord is simply the manifestation of how He always is: 'exalted...on high'. He then fills Zion with all the attributes of His own being: inner righteousness, and the practical justice that flows from it, his faithfulness and reliability, rich stores of saving and healthful welfare, particularly much-needed wisdom and knowledge. Even the 'fear' of the Lord, by which God is seriously reckoned with in honour and obedience, is a gift from God's rich storehouse for those who love Him.
- 7–12 Following verses 1 and 3–4, the judgement that comes to the opposing peoples is pronounced.
- 7 'valiant ones . . . envoys of peace': a picture perhaps drawn from the realisation that Hezekiah's overtures to Assyria have been ineffective to prevent the onslaught (see 37:3).

THIS IS OUR GOD: STUDIES IN THE PROHECY OF ISAIAH

33:8–22

- 8–9** As a result of this faithless and amoral lack of human concern on the part of the enemy, normal activities cease, and the natural order perishes (in the outworking of the curse of Genesis 3:18; see Romans 8:20).
 ‘Lebanon’: a forested region that had always been covered with great trees.
 ‘Sharon’: noted for great beauty; ‘Bashan and Carmel’: famed for their fertility.
 Note the reversal of this desolation in **35:1–2**.
- 10–12** Typically, this is the very situation in which God will move against those who are set against Him and his purposes.
- 10** ‘arise . . . lift myself up . . . be exalted’: a threefold rousing.
- 11–12** ‘chaff . . . stubble’: their worthless evil brings its own empty consequences.
 ‘breath . . . fire’: their sin has in it the seeds of their own destruction.
 ‘burned to lime . . . burned in the fire’: God’s judgement ensures their doom.
- 13–24** A proclamation to the world regarding Zion’s people and their king.
- 13** ‘far off . . . near’: (compare Ephesians 2:13, 17–18) the summons extends to the nations.
 ‘what I have done’: compare ‘the mighty works of God’, Acts 2:11.
- 14** ‘sinners in Zion’ become acutely aware of the presence of the holy God in their midst. The burning coals are there on the altar (see **6:6**) requiring a cleansing and a change of heart if the sinners are not going to be consumed by them in judgement.
- 15** Compare Psalms 15, 24. If the people are to participate in the healing and forgiveness of verse **24**, they must also face the rigour of God’s law.
 ‘speaks uprightly’: compare **6:5**.
 ‘shakes his hands’: has already determined the impossibility of ever receiving a bribe.
- 16** ‘on the heights’: with the Lord, in a secure position, with full provision.
- 17** ‘the king in his beauty’: compare Psalm 45:1–2. This is obviously the anointed Messiah. Yet this king is identified as the LORD in verse **22**.
 ‘a land that stretches afar’: a large kingdom, with plenty of room to move in freedom.
- 18–19** ‘the terror . . . the insolent people’: the arrogant enemy, who counted his chickens before they hatched (as in **36:4–10, 13–20**), will be an absent memory.
 ‘people of an obscure speech’: recalls the threat of foreign invaders of **28:11–13**, now passed.
- 20** This new Jerusalem will be imbued with the peace which the present Jerusalem has rejected (see **30:15, 32:18**).
 ‘appointed feasts . . . tent’: indicate gladness at the presence of the Lord ‘tabernacling’ among them, secure and right.
- 21** ‘broad rivers and streams’: (compare Genesis 2:10–14) a return to an Edenic state, with abundant provision for fullness of life.
 ‘no galley . . . stately ship’: (compare 1 Kings 9:26–28, 22:48–49) may indicate safety from attacks by seafaring invaders, or the absence of any need to depend on commerce from foreign parts, as the Lord provides all that is needed on the spot.
- 22** All of this depends entirely on God’s actions in right judgement and saving rule.

THIS IS OUR GOD: STUDIES IN THE PROHECY OF ISAIAH

33:23–34:14

- 23** ‘Your tackle hangs loose’: in contrast to verse **20b**, Jerusalem in the present as a ‘ship of state’ is hopelessly at sea, with nothing to save or commend it.
‘even the lame’: yet even this crippled vessel will be brought home to share in the spoils of victory. See also 2 Samuel 5:6–8, Matthew 21:14.
- 24** Sickness and sin (the two are not unconnected, see eg Deuteronomy 28:58–61) will no longer be a feature of the new Zion, since the people will have been ‘lifted up’ (literal translation) with regard to these things (compare John 12:31–33).
- 34:1–17** An announcement to the whole world of the final demise of all the nations. **33:1–12** set the scene for both salvation and judgement. Salvation was taken up in **33:13–24**. Now we turn to judgement. While it has to do with all the nations, it focuses particularly on the nation of Edom (verses **5, 6**,). Descended from Esau, who was in rivalry with his brother Jacob from before they were born (see Genesis 25:23, Malachi 1:2–5, Romans 9:10–13), Esau became one of Israel’s traditional enemies (Psalm 60:8). Hostilities continued (Amos 1:11–12) right down to the time of Jerusalem’s conquest in 586 B.C., when Edom’s taunting and brutal enmity reached its nadir (Obadiah 10–14, Psalm 137:7). David was the only one who was able to conquer and subdue Edom. So Edom came to signify the final enemy at the time of the coming of the Messiah (**63:1–6**, Ezekiel 34:23–24, 35:1–15).
- 34:1–2** As this is an announcement of the doom of all nations, so all nations are called upon to hear it.
- 3** This is a picture of universal slaughter, that defiles the whole landscape (compare the graphic equivalent in Ezekiel 38–39). Unredeemed sinners (those not included in **33:24**) cannot finally escape with their lives.
- 4** The whole universe is affected. This is the end of the world as we know it. Compare 2 Peter 3:10–13.
- 5–6** This is seen as a direct and personal action of the Lord, one-to-one. The language of sacrifice, and the blood and the fat which belong to the Lord (see Leviticus 3:16–17, 7:23–27), helps to make clear what is required of sinners at the hands of the holy God.
- 7** ‘wild oxen’: nothing will be spared.
‘mighty bulls’ literally ‘mighty ones’: may indicate that all along Isaiah is using animal terms as symbolic of powerful rulers.
- 8** ‘a day of vengeance . . . year of recompense’: compare **59:18, 61:2, 63:4**. God takes up Israel’s cause, which is His own. The ‘year of the LORD’S favour’ is always accompanied by the ‘day of vengeance of our God’. The day is with a view to the year, which outlasts it.
- 9–10** The landscape of sinners is turned into an irredeemable waste, emptied of human habitation.
- 11–15** To emphasise the absence of human rule or life or activity, it is specifically given over to the animals.
- 11** ‘confusion . . . chaos’: matching the unformed and disordered state of the beginning of creation in Genesis 1:2, compare Jeremiah 4:23.
- 13** ‘thorns . . . thistles’: left with nothing but the curse, compare Genesis 3:18.
- 14** ‘satyr [goat-demon] . . . hag’: may be nothing more than wild goats and night creatures. But these names speak of a fearful descent into darkness.

THIS IS OUR GOD: STUDIES IN THE PROHECY OF ISAIAH

34:16–35:10

- 16–17** ‘seek and read from the book of the LORD’: may not be a reference to any extant prophecy, but simply a figure of how all of this will happen according to the precise and predetermined will and action of God.
- 35:1–10** The return to Zion.
- 1–2** Contrast **33:9**. Transformation, blossoming, and rejoicing. The curse of Genesis 3:18 (see **34:13** above) is reversed.
- 1** ‘be glad [*lit.* of them]’: we are not told who ‘them’ is until verses **9–10**: ‘the redeemed . . . the ransomed’. So all this joy in nature has to do with the return of the people God has rescued. See Romans 8:19–23.
- 2** ‘the glory’: (compare Romans 8:21) comes as a gift, as God brings into His glory those He has redeemed, and with them the whole new creation, and so fully manifests His glory. Motyer: ‘If these words are to be differentiated, *glory* . . . is inherent value, weightiness of worth, and *splendour* [majesty] . . . is the outward token of majesty and dignity’ (p. 274)
- 3** Compare Hebrews 12:12–15, 22–24. Encouragement is needed for the people of God in this time of waiting, in view of what is to come.
‘hands’ denote action, and ‘knees’ the ability to stand upright.
- 4** ‘heart’ denotes inner conviction and strength.
‘Be strong, fear not’: compare Joshua 1:6, when about to enter the promised land. The people are told what is already theirs, and are called upon to believe it—to believe in Him who still considers Himself theirs, despite their weakness.
‘Behold your God’: compare **25:9, 40:9–10**.
‘vengeance . . . recompense’: compare **59:18**.
- 5–6a** Compare **29:10–12, 30:9–10, 33:23b**. This signifies the complete openness and ability to respond that was not there before. It is couched in terms that foreshadow the complete redemption/resurrection of the body (Romans 8:11, 23, 1 Corinthians 15:42–44, 2 Corinthians 5:4), prefigured by the healing miracles of Jesus in Matthew 11:5, Luke 7:22.
- 6b–7** ‘waters’: as in **30:25, 33:21**. See also **43:19–21, 44:3**. Recalls Exodus 17:1–6, Numbers 20:2–13, but goes beyond this to show how God will transform, reverse and restore the devastated situation.
- 8** ‘a highway’: we are still not yet told who this is for.
‘the Holy Way’: open to all those who have been made holy by God and so fit to travel along this way.
‘unclean . . . fools’: those who have not availed themselves of God’s provision for cleansing and sanctification.
- 9a** The way is safe from threatening beasts.
- 9b–10** ‘the redeemed . . . the ransomed of the LORD’: ‘redeemed’ will now be used another twenty-three times in Isaiah. The word posits a redeemer, a relative who is willing to take up the cause of the helpless (Leviticus 25:25, Ruth 3:12, 4:1–6), or avenges one who has been killed (Numbers 35:12). There is great joy in the renewed city at such a mighty deliverance (see **24:14–16; 25:5; 26**; compare Revelation 21:1–4).

Assignment Question 26

In chapters 33–35, trace the stages of God’s goodness (33:1–6, 13–24), God’s defeat of enemies (33:7–12, 34:1–17), and God’s final outcome (35:1–10). How can these words help us live in hope through the changes in our lives?

**HISTORICAL DEMONSTRATION OF GOD’S SOVEREIGN FAITHFULNESS—
36:1–37:38**

This passage corresponds with 2 Kings 18:13–19:37, with some variations, by which the priority of neither passage can be established. It would appear that both Isaiah and the later writer of Kings had access to similar records, and each used the material for their own purposes. We are also told that Isaiah’s writings included accounts of the reigns of kings under which he served (see 2 Chronicles 26:22, 32:32). The writer of Kings has retained Isaiah’s order in relating Hezekiah’s sickness after the removal of the Assyrian threat, when in fact it occurred before (see **38:6**), which Isaiah used in this way to introduce the Babylonian envoys and the prophecy of the exile (chapter **39**), before chapters **40–55** that follow from that. Thus it appears that Isaiah’s version of these events was well known by the time the Books of Kings were compiled.

Isaiah’s reason for incorporating this account at this point in his prophecy is to give a concrete historical instance of God’s faithfulness to His promises concerning Jerusalem and the royal house of David, to underscore the dependability of God in regard to the amazing prophecies that still awaited fulfilment, to encourage the faithful through more dark and difficult times (compare **8:16–17**).

- 36:1** ‘fourteenth year’: 701 B.C., assuming Hezekiah served as co-regent with his father Ahaz from 729 until he acceded in 715 B.C. Isaiah omits reference to the treachery of Sennacherib in response to Hezekiah’s tribute in 2 Kings 18:14–16, though he has referred to it in **33:1**. Isaiah’s concern is to focus on the practicality of faith in God in the midst of a complex and perilous political situation.
- 2** ‘Lachish’: by the time Sennacherib occupied Lachish, he had removed all opposition in the region, and Hezekiah was isolated.
- 3** ‘the conduit of the upper pool’: the very place where Ahaz’s refusal of the way of faith, over thirty years earlier, had set these terrible events in train (see **7:1–17**). ‘Eliakim...Shebna’: note that Shebna has already been deposed, and Eliakim has taken his place, as prophesied in **22:15–21**.
- 4–5** ‘the great king’: the arrogance of the king of Assyria which was to prove his downfall (see **10:12–19**). ‘confidence’: in rebelling against the king of Assyria, see 2 Kings 18:7. Isaiah’s words of confidence and reliance upon God, rejected by Israel, are now echoed in mocking tones by this foreign power, as predicted in **28:9–13**.
- 6** ‘Egypt, that broken reed of a staff’: bears out Isaiah’s prophetic estimate of Egypt’s dependability, see **19:1–20:6; 28:15; 30:1–7; 31:1–3**.
- 7** Here the Rabshakeh (perhaps deliberately) misconstrues Hezekiah’s reforms of 2 Kings 18:4.

THIS IS OUR GOD: STUDIES IN THE PROHECY OF ISAIAH

36:8–37:25

- 8–9** Israel was reliant on Egypt for the supply of horses (see **31:1**). But the Lord had forbidden them to go that way.
- 10** Had the Rabshakeh or his spies picked up on the prophecies of Isaiah (eg **10:5–6**)? If so, he here turns the word of God to his own political advantage. But it cannot be used that way (see **10:7–19**).
- 11–20** The Rabshakeh goes over the heads of the Jerusalem leaders, who wanted him to speak with them in the commercial/diplomatic Aramaic language, to address the whole populace in their native Hebrew. He graphically reminds them of the likely effects of a prolonged siege, with the failure of food and water supplies. He attempts to undermine Isaiah's message of reliance upon the LORD to deliver them (as in **30:15; 38:6**). He sugar-coats Assyria's brutal policy of the deportation and relocation of whole peoples, to keep them in subjection. But he makes the fatal mistake of likening the LORD to other gods of the nations (contrast **40:18–25**). This will prove to be his downfall (see **37:6, 16–20, 23–27**).
- 21** The people have been counselled wisely not to engage in argument or rebuttal with the Assyrian. The wisdom of God far surpasses the wisdom of this world, and is incomprehensible to it. There are times when to engage with the world's logic is to sink to the same level (compare 1 Corinthians 1:18–25, 2:7–8, Matthew 7:6).
- 22** 'clothes rent': a sign of mourning and penitence.
- 37:1** Hezekiah participates in the signs of sorrow, mourning and repentance, and turns to the LORD as Jerusalem's only hope.
- 2–4** Acknowledging Israel's utter helplessness, he calls upon Isaiah to pray to the LORD who has been mocked in this way.
- 5–7** Isaiah's response with a word from the LORD is immediate, and consistent with all that he has said before. A sovereign act of God will remove the threat (compare 1 Kings 22:19–23, 2 Thessalonians 2:11, Revelation 20:9).
- 8–9** The divinely inspired rumour causes the king of Assyria to move north to secure his territory.
- 10** Hezekiah's reply must have made it clear that his reliance was utterly on the LORD alone. Egypt is not mentioned this time (contrast **36:6**). Hezekiah has now come to a clarity and uprightness of faith, resting on the promise of **38:6**.
- 11–13** The king bluntly asserts Assyria's destructive power, the helplessness before it of the gods of the other nations, and implies that Hezekiah will not survive as king.
- 14–20** Hezekiah does not panic (see **28:16**), and this time calmly prays his own prayer, which is a model of how God is to be honoured as sovereign and powerful, the faithful creator, living and active, the one and only deliverer.
- 21–35** Made aware of this by God, Isaiah replies with a word from the LORD. This direct answer underscores the point that believing prayer is the most practical course of action in dealing with the harsh political realities of this world, doing what could not be achieved by military might, diplomatic negotiation, or payment of money. Yet this does not come as a result of pressure put on God by prayer. All this action is predetermined by God (verse **26**). Prayer is God bringing us in to participate with Him in His ongoing purposes.
- 22** 'virgin daughter': still untouched. Assyria's mockery is met by Jerusalem's scorn.
- 23–25** The offence against God is the taking to oneself the prerogatives of God, as if you were on your own, and forging your own way.

THIS IS OUR GOD: STUDIES IN THE PROHECY OF ISAIAH

37:25–38

- 25** Such is the king of Assyria's inflated impression of himself, that he thinks he can block off the great river Nile as easily as a farmer closes off a small irrigation channel with his foot.
- 26–29** All the actions of Assyria, however brutal and devastating, have been the actions of God, planned long before, as a rider on a great horse. Nothing of Assyria's arrogance and hatred of God goes unnoticed by God, however, and God can turn him back, as he brought him out.
- 29** 'my hook in your nose': the way the Assyrians used to lead their own prisoners.
- 30–35** God turns from Assyria to address king Hezekiah.
- 30** A sign of God's sustaining and restorative favour will confirm the truth and finality of this action.
- 31–32** This will prefigure a time of peaceful security and prosperity for the nation. Isaiah already knows that the nation is ultimately doomed (**6:11–13; 39:6**), yet in the meantime Hezekiah's faith will be rewarded.
- 32** 'a remnant...a band of survivors': an important theme in Isaiah—see **8:16–18; 24:14–16a; 35:10; 43:21**.
- 33–34** The proposed siege is called off by the LORD. It does not happen.
- 35** While this comes in answer to prayer, it is essentially from God's own nature, and in keeping with covenant promises made long before.
- 36–38** The fulfilment. (Compare **10:16–19, 24–27, 33–34; 14:24–27; 17:12–14; 29:5–8; 30:19, 27–33; 31:5, 8–9; 33:1**.) Sennacherib never returned to Palestine, and was assassinated twenty years later in 681 B.C.

Assignment Question 27

Show how chapters 36–37 demonstrate God's sovereignty in history and faithfulness to His promises. How does this narrative relate to the earlier chapters of the Book of Isaiah?

FORGIVENESS THROUGH THE SERVANT OF GOD—38:1–55:13

This is what Motyer takes to be the second of the three parts of the prophecy of Isaiah. The first part focussed on the reign of the coming King as promised by God to the house of David (esp. **9:1–7; 11:1–16; 16:5; 32:1–8; 33:1–24**), occasioned by the failure of its present incumbents, especially Ahaz, to live by faith in God's covenant undertakings with Judah and Jerusalem and the house of David. The implications of this coming reign for all the nations round about were also spelled out. This part addresses what happens when the faithlessness of the nation brings God's covenant judgement upon it, so that it appears that all hope is now lost, and the promises are in vain. This becomes necessary as Isaiah foresees the destruction and exile of Jerusalem and Judah at the hands of the Babylonians. Isaiah had been shown personally in chapter **6** how God's grace of forgiveness and cleansing comes from the place of sacrifice into such a situation of utter lostness. He had seen that this is also the hope of the nation, and of the whole world (chapters **12, 25**). He now develops the implications and cost of this, and its glorious outcome, as this is revealed to him in the figure of God's suffering Servant.

Hezekiah's deliverance and faithlessness—38:1–39:8

Isaiah now goes back before the events of chapters **36–37** (see **38:6**) to introduce this whole part with the circumstances in which he was brought to foresee the coming destruction and exile to Babylon.

- 38:1** The prophecy is clear but, as we shall see, is found to be flexible in view of Hezekiah's response. God is personal, and not predetermined.
- 2** 'I have walked before thee in faithfulness and with a whole heart': 2 Kings 18:1–8 and 2 Chronicles 29–31 show that Hezekiah was quite outstanding as a godly reforming king. But Hezekiah is mistaken in thinking that it is his good record that will commend him to God. For when the answer comes, it is simply the fact that he turned to God in faith with prayers and tears that prevails with God.
- 4–5** God, out of His own mercy, in keeping with the promise made to David, graciously extends Hezekiah's life by another fifteen years, in answer to his prayer.
- 6** As an extra unasked-for bonus, God undertakes to save him and the city from the Assyrians (see chapters **36–37**). In keeping with prophecies already made, this is an unconditional promise that will not be revoked.
- 7–8** 'the sign': as in **7:10–17**, when the Assyrian threat was first brought to bear, so now, at its removal, God makes it clear that He is prepared to move heaven and earth to bring about his promises to the house of David. Indeed, these promises are integral to the fabric of God's covenant with the whole of creation (see Jeremiah 33:19–26) and His saving purposes for all time (see Romans 1:1–6). We are not told how the shadow's movement was reversed—it may have involved some refraction of light in the atmosphere (as in Joshua 10:12–14?)—we are simply told that it happened. The account here, more abbreviated than in 2 Kings 20:7–11 (alluded to in **38:21**), emphasises that this is a sign that comes directly from God, and calls Hezekiah to stand well and truly in the way of faith in God alone.
- 9–20** Hezekiah's psalm of deliverance. This is not in 2 Kings: presumably Isaiah, possibly as court chronicler (see 2 Chronicles 26:22, 32:32), had access to Hezekiah's private papers. In the light of Hezekiah's later foolish faithlessness, it clearly shows that at this stage Hezekiah was fully aware of the great danger he had been in, his deliverance by God through prayer, and his own consequent commitments, which sadly were not upheld.
- 10** 'the noontide of my days': any death before the full span of normal life is lived out (Psalm 90:10) is a cause for sorrow (see Philippians 2:27).
- 11** The greatest sadness is no longer being in this life with those we love. At this point in salvation history, before the full revelation comes in the resurrection of Christ, there is also still a question as to how well we might be able to relate with God after we have died (see e.g. Ps. 88:10–12; compare v. **18**).
- 12–14** Images of a tent being taken down, of cloth being cut from the loom and rolled up, of a lion attacking his prey, and of plaintive bird-songs, speak of the fragility of life, the finality of death, the sovereign judgement of God in determinedly bringing our life to an end, and the apparent feebleness of prayer.

THIS IS OUR GOD: STUDIES IN THE PROHECY OF ISAIAH

38:15–39:2

- 15** ‘he himself has done it’: *contra* the Revised Standard Version translation, it would appear that this is the point at which the prayer has been answered. ‘All my sleep has fled’ (*RSV*) lit. in Hebrew ‘I will walk slowly all my years’: an undertaking to watch his step, to walk humbly, thoughtfully and carefully from now on.
- 16** ‘by these things men live’: a prayer that others will learn and benefit from what has happened to Hezekiah.
- 16c** lit. ‘You have restored me to health and let me live.’
- 17–18** Hezekiah recognises that, in this instance, his untimely death would have been a judgement on his personal sin. Notwithstanding his ‘good record’, there must have been something in Hezekiah’s heart that still was not pleasing to God (otherwise, given God’s promise concerning the house of David and the city of Jerusalem, would the Assyrian have been allowed to come so close?). He sees that, if he had died in these circumstances, under God’s wrath, with sin unforgiven, his death would not have been able to participate in thanks, praise or hope. His healing is even more, then, the forgiveness of his sins, and so a marvellous deliverance from fearful destruction. It is not just the process of dying, but the fear of accusation and final judgment, in a moral universe governed by a holy God, that gives death its sharpness and power (see Heb. 2:14–15)—‘The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law’ (1 Cor 15:56).
- 19–20** Undertakings are made here to instil the knowledge of God’s faithfulness into his children, and to look to that faithfulness alone to save him all his days. Sadly, none of these commitments were held to: Hezekiah’s son Manasseh was the most ungodly and determinedly pagan king Jerusalem ever had, and the next chapter shows that, as in **22:8–11**, Hezekiah was still looking to things other than God for peace and security. The Old Testament scriptures are frank and realistic regarding both the good and the bad points of Israel’s leaders (see e.g. also Asa in 2 Chronicles 14–16) in a very sobering way. ‘These things . . . were written down for our instruction, upon whom the end of the ages has come’ (1 Corinthians 10:11).
- 21** Gathers up points omitted in this account that are included in 2 Kings 20:7–11 (see above, verses **7–8**).
- 39:1** The year 702 B.C. Now comes the test, as to what is truly in Hezekiah’s heart: whether he will stand only on the promise to the nation made in **38:6**, in the light of his personal deliverance and the great sign he had received. A decision made from an unguarded heart may give rise to fearsome consequences. Merodach-baladan, of the up-and-coming power of Babylon, was a rebellious thorn in the side of the Assyrian empire particularly in the years 722–710 and 705–702 (see on **13:1, 21:1–10**). His concern here is not just with the state of Hezekiah’s health. No doubt the envoys were seeking the assistance of Hezekiah to join Merodach-baladan’s rebellion, so that Sennacherib would be tied up on two fronts, and some of the pressure would be off Babylon. This Hezekiah was only too happy to do (see 2 Kings 18:7).
- 2** Thus his welcoming of the envoys from Babylon would have been his acceptance of their proposal. He foolishly goes further. He boastfully gives them a conducted tour of his entire kingdom’s resources, no doubt to convince them that he was strong and wealthy enough to be considered among the ‘big league’ of Assyria

THIS IS OUR GOD: STUDIES IN THE PROHECY OF ISAIAH

39:2-8

and its rival power Babylon. It is a faithless, foolhardy and fatal act. No doubt the envoys took careful note of all they saw, and the records of these rich resources may well have still been in the Babylonian archives a hundred years later when Babylon became a conquering power under Nebuchadnezzar. This is asking for trouble.

- 3-4** Alerted by the word of the LORD (v. 5), Isaiah follows up this act which goes so clearly against all he has been given to say of faith in God alone and in His covenant promises to Jerusalem and the royal house of David, on which hinge all God's purposes and actions in history.
- 4** 'from Babylon': no less can God's people today get away with entering into dalliance with that world-system power that is called 'Babylon' in the New Testament: see Revelation 17-18, esp. 18:4-5; 2 Corinthians 6:14-7:1, compare **52:11**.
- 5-7** Isaiah is shown in precise detail who will finally carry out the destruction of Jerusalem and the throne of David, that he has been called upon to prophesy (see **5:5-6, 13-16**). Though precise in detail, the time of the fulfilment of this prophecy is not given. It would have made sense at the time it was given, since even then Babylon was a power to be reckoned with. Isaiah himself was not to know (any more than he would have known the timing of what he was given to say to Ahaz in **7:14-16**) that it would wait for its fulfilment through the reigns of a number of other kings ('sons who are born to you' can refer to an unspecified number of generations) until 597 and 586 B.C. Merodach-baladan's rebellion failed at the hands of Sennacherib later the same year, and Hezekiah's rebellion brought the full might of the Assyrian army against Judah and Jerusalem, as we have seen. Even though Hezekiah reverted to simple faith at the last moment (when he had nothing else left!), and the city was spared at that time, as God had promised, nevertheless the double-minded lie in Hezekiah's heart had already done its damage, to bear its bitter fruit in years to come.
- 6** 'nothing shall be left, says the LORD': the thoroughgoing nature of this prophecy then raises the vital question: what then of the promises to Jerusalem and Judah and the house of David, on which the hope of all the nations rests? What will God do in the situation where, as a result of the faithlessness of God's people, all is now lost? Isaiah has found the personal answer in chapter **6**, and he has seen its implications for the life of the nation (chapter **12**) and for the whole world (chapter **25**). But on what grounds can this be so? This now occasions the prophecies that follow in chapters **40-55**, and beyond, on the larger canvass.
- 8** Instead of prayers and tears, which would have been the appropriate response to this shocking revelation, as in **38:2**, comes this perverse, self-congratulatory, unfeeling, and shortsighted response from Hezekiah. His ambitious desire to play politics in the big league has overridden all his concerns for true religion and simple faith in the holy and faithful covenant-God. Motyer: 'When pride replaces humility, self-satisfaction replaces concern for others, and works replace faith then the die is cast and the kingdom is doomed. When the word of God is met with smugness instead of tears and prayers, the word proves its obduracy and accomplishes its grim purposes' (p. 297).

‘Comfort my people’—40:1–42:17

- 40:1–2** This is the point at which most modern commentators, since Duhm in 1892, say that a new section (chapters **40–55**) begins, written by a later prophet or school of prophecy, during the Babylonian exile 597–538 B.C., whom they call ‘Deutero (Second)-Isaiah’. This is based on their refusal to believe that there could be such a thing as predictive prophecy, or that Isaiah of Jerusalem could have spoken in this way of events which turned out to be over a hundred years later (see **One Isaiah, or three?** above, p. 2). We have already seen there is good reason why Isaiah himself should have written this whole section, and its sequel in chapters **56–66**, as the carefully compiled and necessary continuation of his brilliant prophetic work. ‘Nothing shall be left’ of **39:6** is characteristically followed by ‘comfort my people’ of **40:1** (compare **1:27–2:5; 3:18–4:6; 6:5–7, 11–13; 8:20–9:5; 10:33–11:1; 24:12–16; 26:16–19; 27:10–14; 29:1–8; 30:15–26; 33:23–24**). Judgement on unfaithfulness surely comes, but God and His promises remain, and will be fulfilled, after the people have forfeited them, by the LORD’s own hand.
- 1** ‘Comfort, comfort’: repetition means that this is an intense and heart-felt cry. This command is in the plural, addressed to three ‘voices’ in verses **3, 6** and **9**. We stand again in the reality of **6:1–4**, the LORD among His heavenly hosts, ‘the council of the LORD’, where the prophets hear His word (see Jeremiah 23:18, 22). But we hear a different message from **6:9–13**.
- ‘says your God’ (imperfect tense): ‘your God keeps on saying’.
- 2** ‘Speak tenderly . . . cry to her’: not just to give kindly comfort, but as an appeal, courting her in love.
- ‘warfare’ *or* ‘time of hard service’: relating to the time of exile in Babylon (see **38:6–7, 43:14**). Has the sense of hardship with a purpose. This time has now come to an end.
- ‘iniquity . . . sins’: the inner disposition and the outward acts of sin. The pardon is a very thoroughgoing one.
- ‘that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the LORD’s hand double for all her sins’: sounds like Israel has suffered twice as much punishment from God as was due to her, and that this has paid for her sins sufficiently to bring pardon. But that makes no sense, and misconstrues the true meaning here. The passive ‘her iniquity is pardoned (*or* paid for)’ (compare Leviticus 26:41, 43) means the punishment of their iniquity has been accepted as satisfactory, by God. It occurs elsewhere in this passive form only with regard to the atoning sacrifices in eg Leviticus 1:4. So the satisfactory payment is not something that has been taken out on Israel, but is something that has been effected by a sacrifice provided, as all true sacrifices can only be (see Genesis 22:13–14, Leviticus 17:11), ‘from the hand of the LORD’. This satisfactory payment will be seen to be that provided by God in the sacrifice of the Servant of the Lord (see **53:6, 10**). This is borne out by the use of the word ‘double’, which implies either a gracious and abundant pardon, or (meaning ‘folded double’, so that one side matches the other), an equivalent payment that fully matches what is required. Thus careful exegesis brings us from our false and distorted human way of viewing things into the heart of grace in the God-given sacrifice of the obedient Servant.

THIS IS OUR GOD: STUDIES IN THE PROHECY OF ISAIAH

40:3–11

- 3–11** In implementation of verses **1–2**, three voices (see verses **3**, **6** and **9**) are instructed to bring a message of God’s reliability, eternity and faithfulness.
- 3–5** An announcement of God coming in glory (compare Deuteronomy 33:2). Picked up by John the Baptist in John 1:22–23.
‘in the wilderness . . . in the desert’: inhospitable terrain, that will be transformed by His coming.
- 3** ‘straight’: God will come surely and directly.
- 4** His coming will not be prevented or delayed by any obstacles.
- 5** ‘the glory of the LORD shall be revealed’: as in Exodus 33:18, 34:6–7—God’s covenant-faithfulness, true to His own holy nature.
‘all flesh shall see it together’: not just as observers, but as participants (see Hebrews 2:10).
- 6–8** The frailty of humankind under the judgements of God is contrasted with the durability and reliability of the word and promised action of God.
- 7** ‘the breath [Spirit] of the LORD’: the controlling factor in all things; see Psalms 33:6, 104:29–30.
- 8** In the face of our physical and moral failure, God’s promises will remain constant, and God’s word will do what it says (compare **55:10–11**)
- 9–11** An announcement of the action of God, ‘the arm of the LORD’, in sovereign rule, blessing and care.
- 9** ‘herald of good tidings’ [feminine]: probably not Zion/Jerusalem herself, but as in the first two ‘voices’, a messenger ‘to Jerusalem’ (verse **2**), in this instance a prophetess who, like Miriam (Exodus 15:20–21—and like the women from the empty tomb in the gospels?) announce and celebrate God’s already-accomplished victory.
- 9, 10** ‘Behold’: thrice repeated, as the excitement mounts: God is in view!
- 10, 11** ‘his arm’: (see **30:30**, **33:2**, also **51:5**, **9**, **52:10**, **53:1**, then **59:16**, **62:8**, **63:5**, **12**). It is the arm of a ruler, a shepherd-king (as David was), which brings victory, reward, protection and loving care to His people.

Assignment Question 28

Why is it important that ‘nothing shall be left’ of 39:6 should be followed by ‘comfort my people’ of 40:1? How is this characteristic of Isaiah’s prophecy? Examine 40:1–11: what is the message of comfort that is to be brought?

- 12–31** The great, incomparable, and faithful Creator-God (compare 1 Peter 4:19). As the disaster of the Babylonian destruction and exile is to come upon the people, their hopeless despondency (verse 27) is answered by the reaffirmation of the gracious sovereignty of God as the Creator who will bring his creation to the goal that He has intended for it (see Ephesians 1:3–14). This reality of the LORD as the one and only sovereign Creator is a constant theme of this section (see **43:1**, **7**, **15**, **21**, **44:2**, **21**, **54:5**). There are more references to God as Creator in Isaiah than there are in Genesis.

THIS IS OUR GOD: STUDIES IN THE PROHECY OF ISAIAH

40:12–27

- 12** Echoes of Genesis 1 and 2 are heard in a context which emphasises the vastness of God, and the exactitude and ease with which He accomplishes His task.
- 13** ‘the Spirit of the LORD’: compare Genesis 1:2, Psalm 33:6. In contrast to the pagan myths, the Lord needs to consult no one but Himself to carry out His work of creation.
- 14** Note that God has ‘enlightenment’ (He knows what He is doing), ‘justice’ (right and timely judgements and decrees), ‘knowledge’ (not just intellectual, but an intimate matter of the heart), and ‘understanding’ (wisdom and discernment regarding the inner workings). These come from nowhere outside Himself.
- 15** Things which appear big and far-flung to us are infinitesimal compared to God, and infinitely manageable by Him.
- 16** No religious activity or act of worship, no matter how vast and costly, can match His greatness and worth. Yet, by the end of the book, Isaiah will have told us of a sacrifice that fully satisfies all that God is: that provided by God Himself in the Servant of the Lord (see chapter 53).
- 17** This is not to say that God esteems us as less than worthless, but that ‘before Him’ we are as nothing. For it is out of this ‘nothing’ (as in Genesis 1:2, and 24:10) that He has created us, and recreates us, to be of infinite value in His own image (see Hebrews 11:3, Romans 4:17).
- 18–20** Introduces another theme of this section: the ridiculous and demeaning bondage of idolatry. How can a perishable and immobile object manufactured by human hands, however richly and skilfully adorned, be any substitute for the dynamic and eternal Maker of all? Such a delusion can only be a weedy impoverishment of the human spirit.
- 21** Knowing and understanding come from hearing and being told (compare Romans 10:13–18). All of this comes from God. God has never left Himself without witness, either from the things that He has made (Acts 14:17, Romans 1:19–20) or through His servants the prophets (Amos 3:7, Luke 1:70). We are made and structured to hear and live accordingly.
- 22** The immensity of God is pictured as requiring the vastness of the sky to accommodate Him (though Solomon acknowledged that even that is not large enough—1 Kings 8:27), and the smallness of earth’s inhabitants by comparison (compare Numbers 13:33).
- 23–24** God’s greatness involves the actual determining of the rise and fall of nations and rulers (see Daniel 4:34–37, Acts 17:24–27, John 19:11, Acts 4:24–28).
- 25–26** In contrast to the idols (18–20), God does what the idols never could (see Psalm 96:5). ‘Holy One’: the ultimate contrast—how can an idol ever have the relational fullness of moral perfection?
‘lift up’: (compare Deuteronomy 4:19) the action of worshipping ‘all the host of heaven’ (see Ahaz in 2 Kings 17:16, Manasseh in 21:3). Babylonian and other religions gave names and powers to the stars (as people still do today), but their real names are known and directed by the Lord (Genesis 1:14–19—no names mentioned! Compare also the way God shepherds His people in John 10:3, 27–28).
- 27** So how can God’s people say that God is disinterested, uncaring or powerless in regard to them and in His undertakings towards them? The true conclusion to this display of the greatness of God is not that we are of no account before Him, but

THIS IS OUR GOD: STUDIES IN THE PROPHECY OF ISAIAH

40:27–41:4

that His concern and care for us is direct, complete and effective. Compare Psalm 8:3–4: not a question of how little, but how much more.

‘Jacob . . . Israel’: reflects the name-change given to Jacob as he wrestled with God in his disabled weakness and in his covenant-driven determination.

‘my way is hid . . . my right is disregarded’: God cannot see, and doesn’t care—the false assumptions exposed in Israel by their severe reverses.

28–29 These are answered by what has been said of God’s power in creation—not by way of overwhelming us with it, but by showing the consistent faithfulness of God’s power and wisdom in the face of human weakness, weariness and failure. Not only that, but how He has ever been the One who shares and imparts the strength and reliability of His own nature to those who relate with Him in patient faith.

30–31 Even those at the peak of their fitness and enthusiasm do not have within themselves the innate wherewithal to cope with life that only God has, and that He imparts to us as we relate with Him by faith.

Assignment Question 29

Examine 40:12–31: what is the relationship of God with His creation? What conclusion is drawn with regard to the frailty of His people?

41:1–7 God invites all the nations to acknowledge that He rules the world and what happens in it, but they run off with each other to the pitiful refuge of idols.

1 After addressing Israel (**40:27**), God now speaks to the nations, to invite them to share in the blessings promised to Israel (as in Genesis 12:3, see also **19:24–25, 27:13**)—to ‘renew their strength’ as in **40:31**, by coming to Him in worship. But there is first an issue of judgement to be settled: will they acknowledge the sovereignty of God which they have hitherto rejected?

2–4 The figure of a conqueror is introduced, whose achievements are seen to be the actions of God. This could be an anticipation of the one who is named as Cyrus in **44:24–45:7**, and of the Anointed Conqueror in **59:15–20** and **63:1–6**, who is the Lord Himself in person, but here he is not named. The point here is that it is the Lord who rules personally in all the events of history.

2 ‘whom victory meets at every step’ *or* ‘whom Righteousness calls to follow him’: this conqueror is seen as carrying out the righteous purposes of God.

‘he [the LORD] makes them like dust with his [the conqueror’s] sword’: God is the perpetrator of the actions of this one whom He has stirred up.

3 ‘by paths his feet have not trod’: so swift and extensive are his victories that his feet seem scarcely to touch the ground.

4 ‘calling the generations from the beginning’: God’s actions extend not just to these particular conquests, but across all the ages. All generations are subject to God’s calling, as He declares to them His nature and purposes, announces what is to be, names them as His own, and draws them on to the destiny He has for them, in all His actions.

‘I, the LORD, the first, and with the last’: God alone is the one at the beginning, the only source of all that is. But He will not be alone in the end: ‘last’ here is plural, indicating that there will be many with Him at the end (see eg **43:5–7, 53:10–11, 54:1**, Hebrews 2:10, Revelation 7:9).

THIS IS OUR GOD: STUDIES IN THE PROPHECY OF ISAIAH

41:4–16

- ‘I am He’: God is the one who carries all these things through. He has His being from no one but Himself, and in that He is thoroughly consistent.
- 5–7** In response to the invitation in verse **1**, the far-flung nations come: not in the spirit in which they are called, but seeking refuge with each other in their idolatry, as their defence in life against the strong loving onslaughts of their sovereign creator God. Looking to each other for reinforcement (compare John 5:44), they encourage each other to take courage in the works of their own hands. But unlike God, the idols cannot determine events or bring any deliverance, but remain pitifully immobile.
- 8–20** Three words of consolation follow (see verses **8, 14, 17**), addressed to God’s beloved people of Israel in their fear, weakness and poverty.
- 8–13** In the midst of all the faithless nations, God addresses Israel as the one who holds a special place in God’s purposes for the whole world.
- 8** ‘my servant’: not a servile position, but a high calling with extensive powers in the master’s household (see eg Joseph in Genesis 39:1–6, 20–23).
 ‘chosen’: a slave or servant (as an employee today) is engaged by the master—not the other way round (compare John 15:16, Romans 1:1).
 ‘my friend’: (compare John 15:13–15) a position of kindred spirit, of intimacy in love (compare 1 John 4:19).
- 9** ‘from the ends of the earth’: indicates God’s sovereignty over all the earth in his calling of this particular family.
 ‘and not cast you off’: the tense of the verb indicates that this is God’s determined mode of operation.
- 10** ‘fear not, for I am with you...I am your God’: (as in Joshua 1:1–9) God’s presence and commitment to His people drives out fear (see 1 John 4:18).
 ‘dismayed’: to look anxiously in all directions for help or safety. The one whose faith is in God can be settled and single-minded.
 ‘victorious [*or* righteous] right hand’: see above on **40:10–11**.
- 11–13** A powerfully poetic passage on what will happen to the enemies of God’s people (compare Gen. 12:3), as their right hand is held by God’s right hand.
- 14–16** Israel, in feebleness as a ‘worm’, is made by God into a shredder and disposer of all opposition.
- 14** ‘you worm . . . you men’: signifies inherent inability.
 ‘your Redeemer’: God takes up the role of next-of-kin to these feeble people, shouldering responsibility for all their needs as His own (as in Ruth 3:12–13, 4:1–6).
- 15–16** ‘threshing sledge . . . winnow’: the harvested grain crop was taken to a flat firmly compacted threshing floor, and a wooden sledge with sharp stones and metal pieces fixed underneath was dragged over it to cut the straw into shorter lengths, then on a breezy day it was all tossed into the air with winnowing forks, and the light chaff was separated out from the heavier grain. Here, with the force of a tempest, the straw is removed without trace.

THIS IS OUR GOD: STUDIES IN THE PROPHECY OF ISAIAH

41:17–28

- 17–20** In a setting reminiscent of the exodus wanderings in the wilderness, and in anticipation of the new creation, God provides for the poor and needy in answer to prayer by virtue of being the Creator.
- 17** ‘poor and needy’: (compare **10:2**) those oppressed by the injustice of others.
- 18–20** In the desert water and shade are provided abundantly in wonderful and miraculous ways (compare Exodus 15:27, Psalm 84:6), with a view to all acknowledging that this is the action of God.
- 21–29** God now turns from Israel to address the other nations again. They would claim also that their gods govern world history. This claim is now to be tested. Can the idol-gods not only predict what is to happen, but also cause it to be, as the LORD has?
- 21** The idolaters and their idols are to be brought into court for judgement. ‘the King of Jacob’: for the purposes of the exercise, the LORD for the time being is content to be ranged with the idols as one national deity among others.
- 22** ‘Let them bring them’: unlike God, who moves with freedom, the idol-gods have to be carried into the courtroom. ‘the former things...their outcome’: can the idols understand the movements of history so as to say where they are leading?
- 23** ‘do good, or do harm’: can they do anything, good or bad, that actually effects something?
- 24** The idols remain silent—they cannot reply. So they are shown up to be non-entities (compare 1 Corinthians 8:4), and those who choose them (contrast **41:9**) become, like their idols, an abomination before God, far short of the glory of the God in whose image they were made to be.
- 25–27** The same test is applied to the LORD: He is the one who will both predict and bring to pass the coming of this conqueror (soon to be named in **44:28** and **45:1** as Cyrus, the deliverer of Israel from exile in 539 B.C.)
- 25** ‘from the north’ (the route of his conquest) and ‘from the rising of the sun’ (the east, his place of origin) are predicted very precisely. ‘call on my name’: while Cyrus in his decree does use the name of the LORD (see 2 Chronicles 36:22–23), the meaning here is perhaps more that he will by all that he does testify to the nature and action of God as true.
- 26–28** None of the idol-gods have had anything to say, nor can claim any rights, in this matter. God alone has brought this message of welcome hope to His people. So there is no one else who can be relied upon for wisdom and sound government of events.
- 28** Thus the idolaters and the idols they make are without order or substance, and can be relied upon for nothing.

Assignment Question 30

What does chapter 41 say about the sovereignty of God in history and the events of our personal lives? What is the message to the nations in this? What is the message to Israel?

- 42:1–9** What is now to be done for these nations that are in such a parlous condition? After ‘Behold, you are nothing’ in **41:24** and ‘Behold, they are all a delusion’ in **41:29** come the words, ‘Behold, my servant’. He is the one who will come with

THIS IS OUR GOD: STUDIES IN THE PROPHECY OF ISAIAH

42:1-9

true and sure word and action to be the Lord's remedy for the world's evil and empty nothingness.

1 'my servant': introduced here as such for the first time. By no means a lowly calling, for Abraham, Moses, Joshua, David and the prophets, as well as all the people of Israel, are called 'servants' of God in the Old Testament (as is Job also, and even Nebuchadnezzar!). We have already heard Israel as a whole referred to as 'my servant' in **41:8**. But here the identity of the servant is not disclosed, and it is not proper that it should be at this point.

'whom I uphold': meaning, whom I hold fast to Myself and will not let go.

'My Spirit': privy to the innermost things of God (as in 1 Corinthians 2:10-11), and endowed by God's enabling action.

'justice': (as also in verses **3** and **4**) right judgement, right action, right instruction, right order, divine truth revealed. This is not something sought out or set up by human beings, but is 'brought forth' and 'established' from God by His servant.

2-3 The nature and mode of his service: not drawing attention to himself, and not putting others down, even when they are far gone in damaged weakness.

'faithfully': consistent with what is true.

4 'He will not fail or be discouraged' *or* 'he will not burn dimly or be bruised': picking up the sense of what has happened to those whom he helps in verse **3**. He will be subject to the same pressures they are, but he will not succumb to them.

'established': the word used for setting God's law in place at Mount Sinai in Deuteronomy 4:44.

'the earth . . . the coastlands': this is for the whole world, to its farthest parts.

5 God now addresses the servant personally and intimately.

'thus says the LORD' (as also 'I am the LORD' in verses **6** and **8**): declares how the ministry of the servant derives from and fully expresses the very being of God Himself.

'who created the heavens . . .': all that is said of God as Creator and Sustainer of all things in **40:12-31** (compare Acts 17:24-28) is the grounds of His action now in this servant.

6-7 From the relationship between the LORD and His servant comes revelatory and liberating action.

'I have called you in righteousness': the servant, as did the conqueror, comes in the righteous action of God, but in a different way, and of a different order.

'I have given you as a covenant to the peoples': the servant in his own person embodies the relationship ('covenant') in which God stands with the people He has made, and indeed with the whole of His creation. (In Trinitarian terms, God who is relational in Himself will be in determined relationship with all that He has made.)

8 No one else can lay claim to the glory God has in this action of His servant.

9 'the former things': concerning the conqueror in **41:2-4**, **25-27**, which are predicted and happen.

'new things': the somewhat different matter of the servant, now being revealed.

*THIS IS OUR GOD: STUDIES IN THE PROPHECY OF ISAIAH***42:10–23**

- 10–12** The whole world and all its inhabitants are called to join in a song of praise to God for what He will do for them in this servant. This shows the ministry of the servant to be one of great and deep significance.
- 13–17** The ‘new song’ is not in order to enhance worship with something novel: it arises from a new revelation and a new appreciation of the action of God. Various images denote different aspects of this saving action.
- 13** A cry of victory.
- 14** A cry of travail, giving birth to new life, after an eternity of awaiting the time.
- 15** A picture of widespread devastation of all that has stood in opposition to God.
- 16** God’s personal and compassionate ministry to the ‘blind’ (as in verse 7, with the servant), who have no other way of knowing where they are going.
- 17** As the blind, who have been brought to see, are led to safety, so those who wrongly persist in saying ‘We see’ fall by the wayside (compare John 9:35–41).

Assignment Question 31

What is the relationship of God to the servant in 42:1–9? What is the servant’s ministry? What does 42:10–17 tell us of the servant’s world-wide significance?

‘I have called you by name’—42:18–44:23*The nation will be redeemed—42:18–43:21*

The news of calamity in **39:6** has been followed by the word of comfort: that God by His very nature as Creator of everything and Sovereign over all the events of history will faithfully do all that is necessary to bring His promised purposes through to completion (**40:1–42:17**). This is now applied particularly to what will be Israel’s plight under the coming oppression of Babylon.

- 18–25** Israel has been called by God to be His ‘light to the nations’ (**42:6**), but its own blindness and deafness results in their captivity. Even then, they do not see that it is the Lord who has brought this about, and their heart remains unchanged.
- 18** God’s appeal goes out to the whole world, deluded by their idols (**42:17**) into being unable to hear or see.
- 19–20** Israel itself is no less blind and deaf than to heathen nations (compare **30:9–11**). Its privileged position as God’s dedicated (literally ‘reconciled’) servant and messenger among all the nations makes this all the more culpable (compare Amos 3:2). So even if Israel is ‘my servant’ (**41:8**), Israel in its present condition is not the one who will carry through the servant’s calling of **42:1–9**.
- 20** (literally) ‘you do not observe . . . he does not hear’: I’m speaking to him, but he’s not listening—he can’t hear me!
- 21** God’s choice of Israel was from His own righteous nature for the purposes of making the glories of His law (His very being) known in all the world (as in Deuteronomy 4:5–8).
- 22** But instead Israel in ignominy is to fall prey to the grasping designs of Babylon, and God’s protection will be removed (compare **5:1–7**).
- 23** When this happens, will there be anyone with the discernment to realise who is doing this?

THIS IS OUR GOD: STUDIES IN THE PROPHECY OF ISAIAH

42:24–43:11

- 24–25** ‘Who?’, not ‘Why?’, is the important question. It is God who is dealing with us through all the events of history and our personal lives. And the moral issue of sin, and of His relationship with us, is His whole concern.
- 25** ‘he did not understand . . . he did not take it to heart’: (compare Revelation 16:8–11) no matter how just and right and timely and appropriate the judgements are, it seems that another different work of God is required to effect the necessary change of heart—the even stranger work of the cross (see on **28:21**).
- 43:1–7** In the midst of the ‘fire’ of the judgements that must come, God undertakes to ensure that it will not consume them. In God’s covenant there are cursings as well as blessings, and God carries both through with a view to faithfully bringing about all that He has promised, in His love for His people.
- 1** ‘created . . . formed . . . redeemed . . . called you by name’: each phrase becoming progressively more intimate: from the general act of creation, like that of Genesis 1:1, to the specific care of forming, like a potter, as in Genesis 2:7. Then to the act of redeeming one who is considered next-of-kin, as in Ruth 3:13, 4:4–6, and further to the personal relationship of calling by name, even being called by God’s name (as in **4:1**). All of which adds up to, ‘you are mine’!
- 2** Depicts the dangers and trials of going out into captivity and exile: God is still there in protection to limit the damage that can be done (compare 2 Corinthians 4:8–9).
- 3** ‘the LORD your God’: (compare Exodus 20:2) harks back to the exodus deliverance by which God caused them to be His people, at Egypt’s expense. ‘I gave [literally] Egypt . . . Ethiopia and Seba’: Israel is as much to God as the whole continent of Africa.
- 4** Nothing has changed since then in God’s relationship with His people. So God would give the whole of humanity (*adam*) for them now. Chapter **53** tells us who it is God chooses to give for them.
- 5–6** Envisaged here is something much more than just a return from Babylon—rather, a gathering of people from all over the world. ‘sons . . . daughters’: the relationship God brings people into with Himself through His redemptive action (see Exodus 4:21–23, and **63:16**).
- 7** Recalls the words used in verse **1** to give assurance of future hope.
- 8–13** God testifies in court that He is the only one among all the so-called ‘gods’ who can determine a course of action and then carry it through, as He did in the case of the exodus.
- 8–9** God brings His witnesses into court to testify before all the nations to the truth of God’s words and actions—but they are blind and deaf (as in **42:18–20**)! Yet there is perhaps some hope that their eyes and ears will work again.
- 10–11** Israel, as the servant of the Lord, is responsible for bearing this witness, but being still blind and deaf presumably remains silent. So, in answer to the question in verse **9**, God is the one who must bear testimony to Himself (compare John 8:18). Unlike the other ‘gods’, who were related to each other as those who come before and after, the Lord stands alone as Himself for ever, and He alone is the one who can effect deliverance.

THIS IS OUR GOD: STUDIES IN THE PROPHECY OF ISAIAH

43:12–23

- 12** ‘declared . . . saved . . . proclaimed’: the order is important—God announces beforehand, then acts, then makes His actions known. This all comes to human beings through revelation—through being told and being caught up into the action—not by them trying to work it out for themselves. So God must be His own witness (see Revelation 19:10).
- 13** God as judge decrees the verdict: He is the one, *el*, the Most High God. ‘henceforth’: has the sense of one who ‘was and is and is to come’ (Revelation 1:8, contrast 17:8).
- 14–21** The specific promise of the overthrow of Babylon and the release of God’s people is given. This will be on the pattern of God’s deliverance of His people from Egypt in the exodus, and will prefigure a transformed creation, in which God’s people have been re-formed by God’s hand to be a credit to Him.
- 14–15** God as ‘Redeemer . . . Creator . . . King’ will effect this deliverance for the sake of His people. In both wrath and rescue He remains ‘the Holy One’ (compare Psalm 130:4).
- 16–17** God is still now the God who led out His people from Egypt and put down their enemies.
- 18–19** God’s people are to expect not a repeat of the same thing, but a new action of the same or of even a greater order, ready now to sprout like a germinated seed, in which God will bless and provide for His people as He did in the wilderness—yet even more.
- 20** In view is a transformation of the created order (compare **11:6–9**), in which the other creatures benefit along with God’s people (as in Romans 8:19–21).
- 21** These very tribulations and actions of God will be the making of God’s people into those who, by what they are, as well as what they say, bring glory to God.

Assignment Question 32

42:18–43:21 speaks of Israel being delivered into and rescued out of the hand of Babylon. Why is it important for Israel to know Who is doing this, and what His concerns are? What are the ramifications of this for the wider world?

Sin and Forgiveness—43:22–44:23

After the promise of deliverance from Babylon, God now addresses the need for a deeper deliverance—from sin and from rebellious hearts.

- 22–24** After saying what He made His people to be, God now says how He finds them to be, and exposes their sin.
- 22** The emphasis is on ‘me’: ‘It was not Me that you called upon . . .’ Though assiduous in their religious practice, their service has not been to God as He is (compare Matthew 15:8–9, quoting **29:13**). So the worship that was intended to bring them freedom (Psalm 119:45) has become a wearisome burden to them.
- 23** The emphasis on ‘me’ is to be continued here. It is not that they have failed to carry out these observances (see **1:10–17**), but that they have come in the wrong spirit, perhaps making their ritual performance their means of self-justification before God, rather than through it seeking God’s justification of them. For it is not that these requirements are God’s heavy burden on them; rather they are

THIS IS OUR GOD: STUDIES IN THE PROPHECY OF ISAIAH

43:23–44:8

God's provision for their liberation. Isaiah, who himself came to freedom before the burning-hot altar in the temple (6:1–7), and who looks forward to the newly-rebuilt temple (44:28), is hardly likely to be disparaging God's temple ordinances. But he will be in opposition against those who do not come to God as the Holy One that he saw there.

24 Those who should have been God's satisfaction and delight have become a wearisome burden to Him.
'sweet cane with money' (*RSV*): 'fragrant calamus' (*NIV*)—an ingredient of the anointing oil (see Exodus 30:22–25)

43:25–44:5 With out giving any rationale at this point, God turns abruptly from exposing their sin to declare Himself as the one who brings forgiveness and new life in His presence.

25 'blots out': as a blotter absorbs a spilled ink blot and wipes it clean away.
'your transgressions': not little misdemeanours, but wilful and rebellious disobedience.

'for my own sake': this comes simply and only from God's own nature.
26–28 But first Israel must see that they have no redeeming feature of their own, and that all this fearful judgement rightly comes upon what they are.

26 'set forth your case': they are brought into court before God to find that they do not have a leg to stand on.

27 'Your first father': Adam, Abraham and Jacob are all candidates, for they were all sinners.

'your mediators': your leaders ever since.
28 'utter destruction': the fate of those subjected to God's curse, as in Joshua 6:17.

44:1–2 Before any untoward conclusions are drawn from this, God makes it clear that, in all this, Israel's position before God as 'servant' and 'chosen' remains unchanged, whether as 'Jacob' ('deceiver') or 'Jeshurun' ('upright'). Whether they have done it well or badly, Israel is a nation living with God.

2 'made . . . formed': they will not be abandoned by the one who has brought them into being and shaped them.

'will help you': not just this time, but continually.

3–4 Rain and streams on dry and thirsty ground signify the reality of God's Spirit coming from above upon a wasted and fruitless people to bring abundant life and blessing on generations of families.

5 Those who had no answer they could give to 43:26–28 now rejoice in knowing that they belong to the LORD, as each one acknowledges this in his own way. There is an implication that this may include those from non-Israelite nations (compare Psa. 87:4–6).

6–20 The glory of God as Redeemer of His people (6–8) is contrasted with the inability of idols to move their worshippers out of ignorant delusion and deceit (9–20).

6-8 Besides the LORD there is no god who can be a Redeemer of its adherents, there is 'no Rock' upon whom any can rely as a sure refuge (as in 1 Samuel 23:25), a trust-worthy foundation (compare Matthew 7:24–27), one who is consistently faithful (26:4; 28:16), and whose actions in history are real and not imaginary (Deuteronomy 32:31), who can announce beforehand what He is going to do, and

THIS IS OUR GOD: STUDIES IN THE PROPHECY OF ISAIAH

44:8–24

- then does it. Particularly in this newly-revealed matter of the removal of sin (43:25). This is the truth which Israel is to witness to the world.
- 9–20** While this may appear at first just to be ridiculing idolatry, it is simply descriptive of what actually happens in the manufacture of idols, and makes the point that the idol cannot deliver its adherents from the self-deception and delusion which has given rise to it—at the end of it all they remain unchanged, and unredeemed.
- 9** Idols are unrewarding nothings, yet their adherents are emotionally infatuated by them.
- 10–13** Idols, as human constructs, cannot ever be greater than the human agents that made them—indeed they will be considerably less.
- 14–17** Idols, being made from material substances, can never rise above the material, let alone stand for the divine. It is only by chance that the material used to make an idol does not end up cooking somebody’s dinner. That is the level at which it remains. Yet the idolater does not see it as such.
- 18–20** An idol in fact reduces its worshipper to ignorant blindness, unwitting delusion, and impoverished intellect (compare Romans 1:21–23).
 ‘know . . . discern . . . considers’: heart-knowledge and understanding of the way things really are is denied.
 ‘he has shut their eyes’: may refer to God, as in **6:9–10**, but may refer, more pertinently, to the idol itself (compare 2 Corinthians 4:4)—the only power the idol has.
 ‘ashes’: what the rest of the wood used to make the idol has become, which might as well be the idol itself.
- 21–23** A fitting end to the section that began at **43:22**, reiterating God’s constancy and redeeming care, and calling upon the whole creation to celebrate this in praise.
- 21** The idol has been fashioned by its worshipper, but Israel has been fashioned by the living God.
- 22** Once again, as in **43:25**, the wonder of forgiveness is asserted.
- 23** This has startling implications for all that God has made (see Romans 8:19–21).

Assignment Question 33

Examine 43:22–44:23. What is so terrible about the sin of idolatry? What is so wonderful about God’s forgiveness of sins?

Deliverance from Babylon by Cyrus—44:24–48:22

Isaiah has identified two needs of God’s people: the need to be delivered from the oppression of Babylon, and the need that still is there even after political freedom has come, the need for deliverance from sin. In this section the first of these is addressed, and God’s agent in this deliverance is named as Cyrus, the Persian conqueror who in 539 B.C., over 150 years later, conquered the Babylonian empire and freed the Israelites from exile (along with other nations and their gods)—see 2 Chronicles 36:22–23, repeated and expanded in Ezra 1:1–4.

- 44:24–45:8** The God who has called Cyrus, and the task He has given him, in keeping with His eternal purposes.
- 44:24** ‘Redeemer’: next-of-kin who brings you back into your inheritance.

THIS IS OUR GOD: STUDIES IN THE PROPHECY OF ISAIAH

44:24–45:3

- ‘formed you from the womb’: God’s intimate and personal activity from before the people were there.
- ‘made all things . . . alone’: God is the sole Creator, who made and sustains all things—a good basis for dependability.
- 25** ‘omens . . . diviners’: all occult predictions are thwarted by God’s prophetic action. Babylonian oracles that survive from this time are all professional optimistic predictions that people would be willing to pay to hear, not the actual doom that ensued.
- ‘wise men’: those who seek at the human level to come to the simple key to the meaning of reality, which is the exclusive property of God (see Deuteronomy 29:29).
- 26** God’s purposes in history centre on the well-being of His people, for it is through them that He has chosen to bring blessing on the whole world. The prophetic word of those whom God has sent, in contrast to the pagan ‘prophets’ and philosophers, is the word that will be fulfilled.
- 27** A deliverance analogous to the exodus through the Red Sea is envisaged.
- 28** ‘Cyrus’: many scholars baulk at the notion that Isaiah could have actually named Cyrus so long before, and regard this name as a later insertion, or the whole passage as a later composition, from Cyrus’s own time. Thus we think we can say what God is or is not capable of. Compare the naming of Josiah 300 years in advance in 1 Kings 13:2, fulfilled in 2 Kings 23:15–17. The whole rationale of these passages is that God, in contrast to the idols, actually predicts and then carries through what happens. The clear text needs to be allowed to speak for itself.
- ‘shepherd’: king or ruler (compare Ezekiel 34, Zechariah 11:4–6).
- ‘Jerusalem . . . the temple’: God’s consistent concern and promise throughout the whole prophecy of Isaiah.
- 45:1** ‘anointed’: (literally ‘*messiah*’) signifying God’s appointment to a special role in His purposes, not necessarily signifying holiness of character (compare Hazael in 1 Kings 19:15). Even so, the Davidic messianic associations of this term may be the grounds on which the people question this particular designation and action of God in **45:9**.
- ‘right hand’: taking, empowering, leading. Whether Cyrus is prepared to know it or not, it is God who is bringing him out at this time.
- ‘subdue . . . ungird . . . open’: a good description of Cyrus’s actual conquests. The Nabonidus Chronicle from the time says, ‘the troops of Cyrus entered Babylon without a battle’.
- 2–3** The LORD is the one who goes before him, opens the way, and gives him the spoil.
- ‘that you may know’: some argue that this prophecy is false because Cyrus, although he acknowledged the LORD as the God of Israel (2 Chronicles 36:23), he did not become a convert. It is true that Cyrus acknowledged the many gods of the nations—the propaganda of the Cyrus Cylinder attributes his victory to the Babylonian god Marduk. So he played the political game. But, even if he started out not knowing the true God (verse **4**), the prophetic witness was there for him to find out. That he chose not to does not lessen the divine purpose that he should do so.

THIS IS OUR GOD: STUDIES IN THE PROPHECY OF ISAIAH

45:4–15

- 4–6** God has no qualms about calling and using people without their willing knowledge (compare Assyria in **10:15**), in His ultimate purposes of bringing the blessing of knowing and relating to Him out to the whole world through his chosen nation of Israel.
- 7** A magnificent, far-seeing and potentially life-changing statement of God's sovereign good rule in all things, whether pleasant or difficult. Able to be comprehended truly when seeing the glory of God in the darkness and woe of Christ's cross. Matched and fully explicated in the New Testament by Romans 8:37–39.
- 8** A prayer that this magnificent deliverance of God from above may meet with a ready and fruitful response from below.
- 9–13** Possible objections to God using a foreign king to liberate them are answered. While we now know that the nation of Israel needed to be broken open in readiness for the world's Messiah and the coming-in of the nations, we can appreciate how unwelcome this would have appeared to those who were looking for a national deliverer and an independent state. The reply here is that God does not have to answer to us for any of His actions.
- 9** A pot is not in a position to enter into a legal dispute over the rights or ability of the potter. 'Your work has no handles' (*RSV*) is better translated 'He has no hands' (*NIV*), i.e. He is not capable of doing what He has done.
- 10** By the same token, we can do nothing to determine or question what someone else is giving birth to. That is entirely their own private and intimate business.
- 11** So God by His redeeming action in the exodus has placed Himself in such a relationship with Israel as His child (see Exodus 4:22), and has taken personal responsibility for the shaping of Israel's life as a nation.
'Will you question me . . . ?' (*RSV*): the Hebrew is ironical: 'Ask me . . . command me!'
- 12** More than this, God is the Creator and Lord of all the earth, and his dealings with Israel are with a view to His purposes for the whole world.
- 13** So Cyrus will do what God has said he will do, in the service of God and His purposes.
- 14–17** What, then, is God's plan concerning the nations and Israel? These verses go on to show the surprising reversal that will take place as a result of what the Lord is doing.
- 14** The very nations that were forcefully belittled in the exodus (see **43:3**) will be at the forefront of those who will now come in willing following, submission and supplication to Israel, without conflict, not in weakness but with all their strength and glory, in recognition of the God of Israel as the only God of all the earth, by virtue of what He has said and done (compare Revelation 21:24–26).
- 15** This grand outcome would indeed not be apparent at the time Israel comes under yet another foreign lord in Cyrus. The revelation of this salvation of the nations by Israel's Saviour evokes a gasp of surprise, either from those newly come in, or from bemused Israel itself. A fore-glimpse of the wondrous revelation of Christ for all nations in Ephesians 3:1–13.

THIS IS OUR GOD: STUDIES IN THE PROPHECY OF ISAIAH

45:16–46:2

- 16** If the LORD is thus shown as the only true God of all, then all the other pretenders to god-ness will inevitably be shown up as nothings: ‘idols’ is literally ‘forms’—outward shapes only. Those who do not make their way to Israel will make their way into shame and confusion in the following of their perverse idol-nothings.
- 17** By direct contrast (there is no ‘But’ in the Hebrew), Israel, which now includes those other nations that have come to Israel and Israel’s God, will enjoy shame-free salvation that participates in the very sureness and eternity of God Himself.
- 18–25** In the face of those who find surprising this all-inclusive salvation centred on Israel, God reiterates who He is, affirms that this has ever been His declared intention, and sends out the invitation to all.
- 18–19** God’s deliberate order and consistency in making and populating the earth underlies His plan for all peoples which He has made clear in **2:2–4, 9:1, 11:10, 19:23–25, 25:6–9, 27:13, 42:1–4**, and as far back as Genesis 12:1–3. It is only those who deny the action of God in such a one as Cyrus, and in all the happenings of history (**45:7**), who will refuse to see this.
- 20–21** God re-opens the court-case with the idolaters as to where true saving Godhead is to be found.
 ‘Who told this . . . ?’: i.e. that the nations would be saved in Israel.
 ‘survivors of the nations’: those who have escaped idolatry by joining themselves to Israel and its God.
- 22** ‘Turn to me’: as in Numbers 21:8–9, to the one place where salvation is assured.
- 23** A direct quote from Genesis 22:16: God’s promise to Abraham regarding the nations.
 ‘every knee . . . every tongue’: way beyond the national boundaries of Israel. Applied to Jesus in Phil. 2:10–11.
- 24–25** Those who find their righteousness and strength only in the LORD are those who will come and find their victory and glory (the new expanded Israel), while those who remain opposed will suffer in their shame.
- 46:1–13** The ‘gods’ of Babylon have to be carried on beasts of burden, and will be carried into captivity, in fulfilment of God’s saving purpose for Israel, as the one who has Himself carried Israel all its history, whether Israel has been prepared to acknowledge that or not.
- 1–2** ‘Bel’, also known as Marduk, was the top ‘god’ of the city of Babylon, and his son ‘Nebo’, ‘god’ of wisdom and writing, of the neighbouring city of Borsippa, was particularly honoured by the Babylonian royal family (hence ‘Nebuchadnezzar’). Normally paraded on animals in the New Year procession, they were actually evacuated on beasts by Merodach-Baladan in 703 B.C. when the Assyrian king Sennacherib attacked Babylon in Isaiah’s own day. This becomes a picture of how they are, and what will happen to them in the future. Isaiah the prophet becomes like a commentator at the Christmas pageant: ‘They’re toppling—they can’t keep it up!’
 ‘they cannot save the burden’: those so-called ‘gods’ who are supposed to bear the responsibility for the city’s security and prosperity cannot sustain this, but themselves become an intolerable burden to those who have been depending on them.

THIS IS OUR GOD: STUDIES IN THE PROPHECY OF ISAIAH

46:3–47:9

- 3–4** By contrast, God is the one who actually carries, rather than is carried by, the people whom He has made and formed as a nation.
- 5–7** This places the saving God in a different league altogether from ‘gods’ who themselves have to be made and carried, and who have no ability to save whatsoever.
- 8–11** God’s revelation of His Cyrus-plan has provoked objections among those in Israel who look to maintain their own freedom and independence (**45:9–10**). These objectors are now exposed as the ‘transgressors’ they have always been, refusing to hear or believe (compare **6:9–10**). While their fears are well-founded, that Cyrus will turn out to be yet another conquering and ruthless ‘bird of prey’, yet he is the one God has purposed to be the agent of His will in this situation, and this is how it will be. God continues to appeal to Israel on the basis of His constant care through the whole of Israel’s history, as the unique and only God, who has always declared in advance the outcome of His actions, to believe what He says, and trust what He does.
- 12–13** ‘deliverance’ (*RSV*) here is ‘righteousness’ (*tsedeqah*). So in their wilful opposition and hardness of heart they are not so much far from deliverance as far from God’s rightness: what is right according to God’s nature, purposes and ways. This very rightness God will persist in bringing near to them, whether they understand it, want it, and ask for it, or not, in the form of a salvation that is determined to make Israel His own glory, as He has ever intended His people should be. Thus justification (rightness with God) is by faith in this determined righteousness of God, and not by any rightness or deserving of our own.
- 47:1–15** God addresses Babylon in her pride as the one that will be conquered by Cyrus.
- 1–3** She will have her authority taken away, and will be reduced from her refined and dainty condition to the status of a slave-girl, subjected to dislocation, humiliation and violation.
- 3** ‘vengeance’: exact retribution, without any mitigating circumstances or favourable intervention.
- 4** This is God in the role of Israel’s next-of-kin, the exodus-Deliverer, the one who rightly moves against all that is unholy wickedness.
- 5** Babylon will no more be able to speak with authority over other nations, or have any clear idea of where it is going any more.
- 6** Certainly God gave Israel into Babylon’s hand, but that does not give Babylon licence to act without mercy or with indiscriminate oppression—for this abrogation of human responsibility she will be answerable to the God of all.
- 7** In her arrogant assumption of unchallengeable authority Babylon did not give thoughtful consideration to any moral consequences or responsibility for her actions. But there are such things as ‘crimes against humanity’, and there is One who calls to account.
- 8–9** Widowhood and loss of children meant the removal of all ongoing provision, security and standing in the community (contrast 1 Timothy 5:3–10). This is the exact retribution for one who, as a ‘lover of pleasures’ has cared for no one but herself. Not even her ‘many sorceries and . . . enchantments’, for which Babylon was renowned, will be able to stave off what is coming to her.

THIS IS OUR GOD: STUDIES IN THE PROPHECY OF ISAIAH

47:10–48:9

- 10–11** Babylon's so-called 'wisdom' and 'knowledge' took no account of anyone but herself, least of all God (compare Romans 1:21–22, 1 Corinthians 1:19–21). The wickedness/evil (the same word in both verses) in which she has participated will be brought back upon her, and she will have no way of seeing what is coming or knowing what has hit her.
- 12–15** The multitude of Babylon's occult practices are no competition with the coming action of God; the confused religious pronouncements of their many gods only wear them down; the expert predictions of those who make horoscopes from studying the stars cannot foretell what God is bringing to pass. These so-called 'comforts' serve only to bring all-consuming destruction. The practitioners of false religion are there not to serve their clients but themselves: they end up slave-trading with those who look to them, and then go off in their own direction seeking to save their own skins. In contrast with those who look to the one true God, these are left with 'no one to save you'.
- 48:1–22** In chapter 47, Babylon conquered by Cyrus was addressed; now in chapter 48 Israel delivered by Cyrus is addressed. The theme is Israel's continuing sin in the face of God's deliverance from Babylon, and of God's perseverance in His purposes for Israel, according to His own nature as the Holy Redeemer.
- 1–2** Despite the fact that they originate from the source of Israel's nationhood, call on God's name, and consider themselves to belong to His holy city, the people of Israel have in fact forfeited any right they had to these things, for in them they have not related with God in a true and right or godly way. But God and His name remains the same as when He brought the undeserving and recalcitrant slaves out of Egypt (see Exodus 3:13–17).
- 3–5** Again comes the argument of God's predicting and carrying through of events, in a way that idols cannot, as His claim to exclusive Godhead. Here this course of action is specifically related to Israel's known obstinacy and refusal to acknowledge the truth, in its bondage to idolatry. The documented facts are obvious, if only they will have a heart to see them.
'former things': could be events like the exodus, announced beforehand and then carried through, or even the events of the deliverance from Babylon by Cyrus, that have been prophesied here. They are to be seen as the saving actions of God alone.
- 6–7** 'new things': the matter of the servant, hitherto hidden in ways that could not be humanly foreseen, but now made known ('created') and brought to bear. The sheer unexpectedness of this great grace will forestall Israel's propensity to say, 'We knew that already.'
- 8** For God has ever known Israel's lifelong devious and rebellious resistance to God's revelation of Himself in relationship with them (see 1:2–3). In this section of the prophecy, this chapter is a climax of God's denunciation of Israel in the strongest terms. This exposes the deep and constant need for the ministry of the servant, to which we return in chapter 49.
- 9–11** So it is not for Israel's deserving, or any inherent glory Israel has, that God will act, but out of God's own nature ('my name's sake . . . my praise . . . my glory'). And act God will, to ensure that Israel does not suffer the full eradicating force of

THIS IS OUR GOD: STUDIES IN THE PROPHECY OF ISAIAH

48:9–22

the wrath that is due to them, but will be spared to participate in God's holy and loving purposes for them.

'I have refined you, but not like silver': if God had been waiting for Israel to come out as silver, then nothing would have been left, for all Israel's 'silver' is all dross (see Ezekiel 22:18). But the Babylonian 'furnace of affliction', like the Egyptian one (Deuteronomy 4:20), will be that from which, remarkably, and only by God's own grace, something wonderfully emerges.

'My glory I will not give to another': Only in God, in His 'name'—His being and nature and action—and not in any idols, are the resources to effect so great a salvation.

12–13 The grounds for this hope are clearly and broadly set out: in the beginning, when He created all things, God had no constraints but those of His own holy nature, and in the end, there will remain no opposition to His glorious purposes. If He has called the heavens and earth into being, and that has happened, will His calling of Israel be any less sure or effective? Israel is bidden to hear this great call.

14–15 Israel is urged to hear again, in its reluctance to hear or speak of it, the sureness of God's plan to bring deliverance from Babylon by Cyrus, whom God has chosen in His steadfast love.

16 Now, in the light of that, hear also God's now plain and open secret of the servant, by whom the even greater and more needed deliverance—from this obstinate sin and rebellion—will be brought about.

'And now the Lord GOD has sent me and his Spirit': just at the right time, the servant himself speaks out, consistent with his mission in **42:1–9**, in anticipation of what is said of him in **49:1ff**.

17–19 As 'Redeemer,' who brings deliverance, and as 'the Holy One of Israel', who must judge sinners in order to bring them to His holiness, God sets out His true and good ways, that alone are the ways of peace and righteousness, of fruitfulness and preservation. But Israel has wickedly refused to walk in them.

20–21 Nevertheless, God will bring about the deliverance He has promised, as He did from Egypt, and will provide and care for them in the days that follow, as He did in the wilderness. Israel is commanded to take advantage of this salvation.

22 But the truth is that, even with this deliverance from the oppression of Babylon, the sin of Israel will still remain with them, and so they will still be without the peace they could have had in verses **18–19**.

Assignment Question 34

What is the nature of the great deliverance effected through Cyrus in 44:24–48:22? What is the response of Israel to this? What even greater deliverance is still needed?

Deliverance from sin by the servant—49:1–55:13

The need for a greater deliverance than simply a political one brings us again to the ministry of the servant (see **42:1–9**, **48:16**), as one who not only bears witness to but in himself actually is God's light, salvation, covenant and glory, and so is much more than any prophet ever claimed to be. Far more than a political conqueror, he brings people release into the truth, and into newness of heart and mind.

THIS IS OUR GOD: STUDIES IN THE PROPHECY OF ISAIAH

49:1–13

- 49:1–6** The servant himself speaks (as in **48:16**).
- 1** ‘Listen to me’: elsewhere in Isaiah used only of God Himself (**41:1, 46:3, 12, 51:1, 7, 55:2**). Compare Deuteronomy 18:18–19, Acts 3:22–23, Mark 1:22, 9:7). ‘coastlands . . . peoples from afar’: the appeal is to peoples of the whole world, to its furthest reaches (compare **42:1, 4, 6**).
‘from the womb . . . from the body of my mother’: compare **7:14**, Genesis 3:15.
‘named’: literally ‘kept in mind’—the actual naming takes place in verse **3**.
- 2** ‘my mouth’: the topic is the servant’s ministry of word, not any literal weapons of warfare (compare **11:4**, Revelation 1:16; 2:12; 19:15).
‘sword’: effective in close combat; ‘polished arrow’: accurate for far targets. Hence **6**: ‘Israel . . . ends of the earth’, **57:19**, Ephesians 2:17.
‘in the shadow of his hand he hid me . . . in his quiver he hid me away’: intimacy, and readiness.
- 3** ‘Israel’: the naming—the controversial climax of these verses. Israel, having failed and rendered itself incapable and unfit for the worldwide mission accorded to it in Genesis 12:3, (see **48:1–2, 8**) requires a fit and worthy individual from within Israel to stand in for it.
‘in whom I will be glorified’: normally God is glorified in what He does for His people (as in **44:23, 60:21**). Only here is He to be glorified in an individual person—a unique action of God.
- 4** the servant, as a real human person, is despondent at the apparent failure of the ministry to which he has been called, despite full expenditure of strength and effort. Yet at the same time, with a real human faith, he looks fully to the Lord for all that is rightly due to him, and for the complete outcome. Compare Matthew 11:20, 25, John 6:66, 12:37–41, 1 Peter 2:23.
‘nothing and vanity’: emptiness, devoid of order and meaning or sense, without any substance. Here is one who in this situation can say still, ‘my God’.
- 5** The answer to what the servant feels like saying is what God Himself has said with regard to the servant and his ministry, and all that signifies of God’s relationship with the servant in formation, calling, task, honour and enabling.
‘my God has become/has been my strength’: a relationship more intimate than just receiving strength from God.
Here it is revealed that the servant’s worldwide ministry (chapter **42**) focuses first on the recalling and restoration of Israel back in to God.
- 6** But the nations are to know that it is not to stop there: this servant is to be himself in person God’s own light and salvation to the whole earth. (Hence Matthew 15:24, 28:18–20).
- 7–13** The Lord adds His own testimony and promise to what the servant has said, and again the world is called to the response of joyful singing. This follows a similar pattern to **42:5–13**, and relates to the servant’s task regarding both Israel and the nations (**49:6**). Verse **7** relates to the nations, and **8–12** particularly to Israel. But it needs to be remembered that the servant himself has already been designated as ‘Israel’ in person (verse **3**), the servant’s mission to Israel relates to God’s purposes through Israel for all nations, and that Israel-to-come is an expanded people of God (see on **45:14–17, 20–25**). Hence the singing of verse **13** is all-inclusive.

THIS IS OUR GOD: STUDIES IN THE PROPHECY OF ISAIAH

49:7–18

- 7 Without explaining why or how, the LORD speaks of the servant as despised and repudiated by the nations, and one whom the nations think is at their disposal (as in John 19:10), and yet one whom the nations will acknowledge with worship. The only reason given for this here is God's own choice of and faithfulness to the servant, as Israel's Holy Redeemer.
- 8–12 Here the servant again is called uniquely and personally God's 'covenant to the people' (as in 42:6), and the restoration of the people to the desolated land is promised. Again imagery from the exodus, but also beyond that (compare Rev. 7:15–17), is used to depict the return of the people to their heritage in God, the One who compassionately provides for, protects and leads them all along the way.
- 11 'my mountains . . . my highways': both natural barriers and human constructions belong to God and serve His purposes in the return of His people.
- 12 They come from all directions, and from the farthest parts of the earth. 'Sinim' (*Hebrew*, changed to 'Syene' or 'Aswan' in different translations) is an unknown place with a faraway ring to it: maybe 'Woop-Woop' would be the appropriate Australian translation!
- 13 Again see how the whole creation is to be caught up into the joy of the God-effected return of the people of God to their true heritage (as in Romans 8:21). Here ends the second 'Servant Song'.
- 49:14–50:3 In a series of five oracles (see 'says the Lord' in 49:18, 22, 25, 50:1), God affirms His dynamic active saving love for His people. These all have to do with the gathering of the family of God.
- 14 Throughout this section Zion has persisted in unbelieving and despondent recalcitrance and complaint (see 40:27, 41:26–29, 42:18–20, 43:22–24, 44:18–20, 45:9–11, 46:8, 12, 48:1, 8, 22), despite many declarations of love and promises of strong hope and admonitions to true faith, in joy and peace. Now again 49:14 comes like a wet blanket on all that has gone before, and it is only the responsiveness of the servant, in marked contrast to the unresponsiveness of Israel, that gives any substance to the abundant promises that continue to be given.
- There is a contradiction here: how could 'the LORD', whose name is synonymous with remembering His covenant to rescue and restore His oppressed people (Exodus 6:6–8), and who as sovereign 'Lord' is not constrained by any sinful human considerations, ever be said to have forgotten or forsaken His people?
- 15 We are shocked at the unnaturalness of a mother who ends up denying the intimate bond she has with her child. God's bond with His people is even closer, and undeniable.
- 16 God bears in His hands the wounds of being committed to His people, in a way that does not become fully clear until John 20:19–20.
- 17 The Masoretic text of the Hebrew has 'your sons gather to you' (rather than 'your builders' of the Qumran text). This makes better sense in the light of verse 18, and recalls 43:6–7.
- 18 The image changes from children gathering to their mother to a bride putting on her ornaments. All of this is the expression of God's relational love for His people.

THIS IS OUR GOD: STUDIES IN THE PROPHECY OF ISAIAH

49:19–50:5

- 19–21** This is a miracle: it is not just about a return from Babylon, though it uses that kind of language. Though it might have been otherwise, only a relative few returned when Cyrus gave the word in 539 B.C. Here more come back than ever left, such that there is not enough room for them. How could this be, from one who is ‘bereaved and barren, exiled and put away’, like a not-wanted wife? This is about people returning to God as a result of some mighty work of salvation that God has done (see further **53:10–11, 54:1–8**).
- 22–23** At a signal from the sovereign Lord of all, the nations which up to now have been used to oppress God’s people will serve to bring them home, and submit to them as those to whom they are spiritually indebted (compare **45:14**, 1 Corinthians 14:25, Romans 15:25–27). This will show that waiting expectantly in faith on the faithful God will be rewarded (as in **40:31**).
- 24–25** ‘tyrant’ (*RSV*, after the Qumran text) is better translated ‘righteous one’ (after the Masoretic text), even though on the face of it it does not make sense. But it is theologically sound: God’s people rightly went into captivity, and God will make it that their rescue does not contravene His righteous nature, in that all the requirements of His righteous law will be fulfilled.
- 26** A sad but inevitable corollary of this will always be that those who persist in their refusal to submit to God and His people will perish (see even **66:24**). Here we see that those who refuse to look to God in all things but seek to feed only from themselves will by that be consumed.
- 50:1** In the face of Israel’s complaint (**49:14**) that their relationship with the Lord has suffered irretrievable breakdown, God challenges whether the divorce proceedings have ever been set in train, or whether God has ever considered selling off His people. The exile must be seen in the context of their strongly continuing relationship.
- 2–3** Far from God forsaking Israel, it is Israel who has refused to make any response to God’s call and approach. (This makes even more poignant the lone response of the servant in **50:4–5**.) And now, will they doubt the willingness or ability of the one who wrought such great deeds for them in Egypt and in the wilderness (see Exodus 14; 7:17–18; 10:21, 23)?
- 50:4–9** The third Servant Song. In contrast to **50:2**, here is one who hears and responds in active and obedient faith the actions and calling of the ‘sovereign LORD’ (verses **4, 5**: preparation for ministry, **7, 9**: sustaining through suffering). The servant picks up every point at which Israel has so totally failed.
- 4** Here is a taught disciple whose ear and whole being has been opened by God to hear God’s word, as the essential prerequisite for being able to speak that word to others with all the consolation and strength with which it has come to him. This comes over a long time of ‘morning by morning’ hearing from God—not as a self-adopted discipline, but as a ready response to God’s own daily faithful approach to him. Here is the *adam* that has not tried to hide from the call and approach of God, because he has nothing to be ashamed or afraid of (see Genesis 3:8).
- 5** Here, on one occasion, came a revelation to the servant of a particular calling that would involve the servant in deep suffering. We are not told what this is. The only previous hint of such suffering has been in **49:7**. When it comes, the servant

THIS IS OUR GOD: STUDIES IN THE PROPHECY OF ISAIAH

50:5–51:5

is willing and obedient to carry it through, in a way Israel, and the whole human race, has never been.

6 Three forms of suffering are specified together: flogging, malicious torture, and personal humiliation. These are bravely and willingly borne. The servant is not named, but the sign is given by which he can be identified.

7 Knowing the present help of the Lord on his side as his Kinsman-Redeemer in this ordeal, the servant faces it unflinchingly, testifies to the truth that he has been upheld, and confidently asserts that he and all that he has stood for will be vindicated as true, substantiated and effectual (compare Mark 14:61–62).

8–9 The contest is called, but the fact that God is with the servant on his side is proof positive of the servant's unassailable righteousness according to the judgement of God, and so no other judgement can stand, or hold any substance.

10–11 Not until here is the speaker of the previous verses identified as the servant, who is now held up as a model for all who will walk in the way of faith in God, which is the way of unrelieved darkness (see 2 Corinthians 5:7). Those who try to cope with this experience of darkness in their own alternative way by fabricating their own 'lights' will by them be consumed.

51:1-52:11 The urgent excitement of these eight oracles is reflected in their poetic form by the doubling up of words and parallel phrases (see **51:1, 4, 7, 9, 12, 17, 52:1, 11**), to culminate in the full revelation of the saving work of the suffering servant in **52:13–53:12**. In the first three (**51:1–8**) the Lord speaks of His righteousness and salvation to the remnant of the nation who 'pursue righteousness' and 'seek the LORD' by following in the way of the servant's faith (**50:10**). This evokes in them a longing and a prayer for God to awake and act (**51:9–11**), which is met by a reassurance and reminder of God's nature as Creator and Redeemer (**51:12–16**). God then tells them in the final three oracles (**51:17–52:11**) that they are the ones that need to be wakened, because God's action is already in train—in His servant.

51:1–2 'deliverance' (*RSV*): literally 'righteousness', which comes to those who 'seek the LORD'. We can have no righteousness apart from that in which we participate through a personal and intimate relationship by faith with the God whose very life and nature and action is righteousness. This is the full equivalent of the New Testament 'justification' (Galatians 3:6–9, 11, Philippians 3:9).

'rock . . . quarry': not so much a solid and reliable source as something inanimate ('dead' Romans 4:19) from which God has brought abundant family life.

3 The transformation of desolated Zion into the garden of Eden, with its peace and freedom from the curse of sin, will give rise to joyful thanksgiving and song.

4–5 'justice . . . light . . . peoples . . . coastlands': reminders of the ministry of the servant in **42:1–9**; 'my arm': looks towards **53:1**—the universal personal saving action of God.

'deliverance': again, better as 'righteousness' (see verse **1**). The saving action of God will uphold every aspect of God's righteousness, and the law which expresses it, without demeaning or detracting from its holy requirements in any way (see Matthew 5:17–18, Romans 8:3–4).

THIS IS OUR GOD: STUDIES IN THE PROPHECY OF ISAIAH

51:6–22

- 6** The built-in obsolescence of the created order is contrasted with the eternity of the things of God that we grasp by faith (compare 2 Corinthians 4:17–18). ‘die like gnats’ (*RSV*): better translated ‘die in like manner’—our mortality is little different from that of a moth-eaten garment.
- 7–8** ‘in whose heart is my law’: compare Jeremiah 31:33, Ezekiel 36:26–27. ‘reproach . . . revilings’: compare **50:4–9**. Those who follow in the way of the servant will suffer as he does, and their enemies will suffer the same fate as his, in God’s plan of eternal salvation.
- 9–10** Stirred by these promises of God, the faithful (mistakenly figuring that God is asleep!) ask God to be active as He was in the occasion of the exodus. ‘Rahab . . . dragon’: (see on **27:1**) terms of Canaanite and Babylonian mythology that represent the uncontrollable forces in the universe such as the sea, here shown to be subject to the Lord of all creation in the actual historical event of the exodus.
- 11** Compare **35:10**, perhaps here reminding God of that promise—as if He needed to be reminded! ‘shall flee’: literally ‘will have fled’.
- 12** ‘I, I am he’: in response to their ‘Awake, awake’ of verse **9**, God expresses His ever-present readiness to bring His people to that place of strong comfort.
- 12–15** God reminds the people of what they appear to have forgotten: who they are, by virtue of who God is, who made and formed them as His people, against what they are who are opposed to them. So the cowering imprisoned people will be released by the sovereign action of their God, on whom they are totally dependant for such glorious freedom.
- 16** In words addressed to the servant (compare **49:2–3**), the faithful Creator affirms the sureness of the ultimate outcome of all His actions: the making of a people in full relationship with Himself.
- 17** Far from the Lord being drowsy, it is Jerusalem that needs rousing—from a drunken stupor (compare **28:7–8**, **29:9–10**)! Brought about in fact by the deliberate and duly measured wrath of God against her iniquity.
- 18–20** The terrible and unrelievable effects of the wrath of God: absence of all knowing the way, removal of all caring companionship, desolation and decimation without condolence or comfort, exhaustion and relentless entrapment with no way of escape. See Romans 1:18–32, Mark 15:34.
- 21–22** Inexplicably, and yet with the full justice of One who sovereignly redeems by acting in a cause that is undeniably just (how could this be?), God has been acting for this one who has rightly been subjected to such a drunken stupor. He has now done something to remove permanently both the hateful cause and its ghastly effects. This cannot be an arbitrary change in God’s policy and favour, according to some fickle whim like the changing of the wind (see Malachi 3:6). So how can this be so? We are being brought pressingly and inexorably to **52:13–53:12** for the full and wondrous revelation to be made.

THIS IS OUR GOD: STUDIES IN THE PROPHECY OF ISAIAH

51:23–52:12

- 23** Conversely, as the other side of this action of God, as in the case of Egypt (**51:9–10**), Assyria (**10:12–27**) and Babylon (**47:1–15**), the wrath must come on those tormenting oppressors who remain arrogantly opposed to God in their self-sufficiency (compare **50:11**).
- 52:1–2** The picture is one of a woman waking up to find new clean clothes—beautiful royal robes—laid out for her to wear. And as she puts them on, dirt and fetters that have held her down fall from her. God’s wrath that has held her captive has somehow been fully worked through, and has been completely removed (**51:17–23**). The requirements of God’s holiness have now been fully met and satisfied (how could this be?) such that God is now sharing His own holiness with her! The former shameful captive is now ‘the holy city’, no longer to be trampled upon by those who are unfit to belong to God. With repeated injunctions, the bemused Jerusalem is urged to take up her new condition. Compare Colossians 3:9–10.
- 3–6** Repeated declarations of the LORD Himself (verses **3, 4, 5** twice) testify to the truth of what is coming. Every time they have been given into the hands of their enemies, from the time in Egypt to the invasion by Assyria, no money has changed hands. It has been under the sovereign hand of God, and God’s people have remained God’s property. So they are God’s, for God to reclaim them at any time. But language of selling and redeeming implies cost and payment—if it is not by money, how is it? We are still not told—just that it is so. God has bound His name—His very being and reputation—so closely to the destiny of His people, that the wailing and helplessness of their sufferings impinge intolerably upon His very being. So He clearly undertakes to show His true name and nature in action, in such a way that he will address them directly in Person, and appear unmistakably before them in a way that enables them to see Him—and still live!
- 7–10** The picture is now of a lone messenger running to the city to report the outcome of a great and decisive battle. The people watching anxiously from the wall see him in the distance. His very appearance, rather than that of the dispirited remnants of a defeated army, gives rise to excitement and hope. As he comes near enough to call out, the message starts to come through: ‘Peace!’—the conflict is ended; ‘Good news!’—no sadness mars the victory; ‘Salvation!’—the oppression is broken and the captives are free; ‘Your God reigns!’—the victor King has established His good rule over all. The waiting people begin to shout and sing together for joy, for, sure enough, right on the heels of the messenger is the King Himself. All of this applies to the great theme of these chapters since **49:1**: spiritual deliverance from sin and the return of the people to God, for which God has been prepared to roll up His sleeves and personally get stuck into it. The salvation promised to all the nations (**51:4–6**) has come.
- 11–12** A saving action of judgement and liberation has taken place (as at the exodus) and the people, newly clothed in their priestly garments of holiness (**52:1–2**) as in Exodus 19:4–6), are now making their triumphal progress to the promised land, bearing holy things of God (as in Numbers 1:50).

THIS IS OUR GOD: STUDIES IN THE PROPHECY OF ISAIAH

52:12–53:3

‘purify yourselves’: has the sense of fitness and readiness, as the ‘polished arrow’ that the servant is in **49:2**.

- 12** Panic is no more. There is calm and steady progress in the commitment of knowing that God surrounds His people, leading and bringing up the rear.

But we still have not been told how all this is to come about. We have now been brought to the point where we will be shown—if we can receive it.

- 52:13–53:12** In this fourth and final Servant Song, we come to the full revelation and completion of the person and work of the servant. Suffering, alluded to in **49:4, 7**, and named in **50:6**, is shown to be the wounding and bruising of one who bears the sin of others, as the action of God in laying on the servant chastisement that should have been ours, to bring many to peace with God. This has been prepared for by the mounting excitement of the promises of **51:1–3, 4–6, 7–8**, and the blessings of **51:17–23, 52:1–10, 11–12**, with the appeal and reassurance of **51:9–16** concerning the ‘arm of the LORD’. Now this marvellous saving action of God is about to be fully revealed.

- 52:13–15** The remarkable exaltation of the servant is matched by a contrasting abhorrence of him by many, which gives rise to a new seeing and hearing of an amazing truth.

- 13** ‘exalted . . . lifted up . . . very high’: compare language used of God Himself in **6:1** and **33:10**. Compare also the resurrection, ascension and heavenly session of the Lord Jesus.

- 14** ‘him’: Hebrew ‘you’—very direct.
‘many’: see also **52:15, 53:11, 12**, referring to all who stand to benefit from the servant’s action (as in Revelation 7:9).

- ‘astonished’: appalled, shocked, shattered—a very strong word. The disfigurement of the servant is such that he is scarcely recognised as human.

- 15** ‘startle/sprinkle’: the meaning of the Hebrew word is uncertain. Motyer opts for ‘sprinkle’: a cleansing and atoning priestly action, applied universally, which then becomes the turning point from revulsion to the dumbfounding realisation of a wonderful truth.

- 53:1–3** The scornful rejection of this one, on account of his unimpressive origins and appearance, highlights the moral and relational bankruptcy of the human observers and the absolute necessity of divine revelation to be able to know this one as God’s own action among us.

- 1** ‘the arm of the Lord’: not just an instrument of God but, according to **51:9, 12, 15, 52:6, 8, 10**, God Himself coming in person to redeem.

- 53:2–3** ‘young plant . . . root out of dry ground’: the earthly natural origins of this person (compare Mark 6:3, John 6:42, 7:41–42, 52), distinct from God (compare John 10:33), without any outstanding attractiveness, lead to his being mockingly dismissed, without any following, and actively shunned as being of no human value whatsoever. Thus he is a person who becomes familiar with ‘sorrows’, or pains, and ‘grief’, or sickness—not by natural temperament but by what is put upon him. Yet the use of this plant symbolism hints at what Isaiah has already

THIS IS OUR GOD: STUDIES IN THE PROPHECY OF ISAIAH

53:3–7

said in **6:13** and **11:1** of the Messiah—Emmanuel, ‘God with us’—as ‘seed’, ‘shoot’ and ‘branch’. This shows up those who reject such a one to be so infected and perverted by sin that only a saving revelation from God can make them see and know him for who he is.

- 4–6** Here is the heart of the revelation, making known to the observers what they themselves could not see: that the griefs and sorrows he suffered were not on his own account, but that he was made by God a substitute for us, to bear our weaknesses and wrongs, and their final reckoning. The background for this is Leviticus 16:15–22, where the high priest makes atonement for the holy place to cleanse away the uncleannesses, transgressions and sins of the people with the blood of one goat, which has been killed, and loads the iniquities, transgressions and sins of the people onto the head of another goat, which is sent out to a solitary place. Both these actions are combined here in the one servant.
- 4** ‘he . . . we’: the people stand aloof and separate from the servant, who suffers alone, judging him to have deserved all the blows that he receives from God, that he suffers in his person.
 ‘Surely’: carries a note of surprise and sudden realisation that it is our sickly weaknesses and painful sorrows that he has shouldered as his burden and made his own.
- 5** ‘wounded’: ‘pierced’, as God did to His enemy the ‘dragon’ in **51:9**.
 ‘bruised’: crushed or trampled to death.
 ‘for our transgressions . . . for our iniquities’: on account of our wilful rebellion and crooked perverseness.
 ‘the chastisement that made us whole’: ‘the punishment necessary to secure or restore our peace with God’ (Motyer). Compare **9:6**, **48:22**, **54:10**.
 ‘stripes’: lacerations laid open and weeping.
 ‘healed’: compare **30:26**—complete healing and restoration, as on that bright day.
- 6** ‘like sheep’: in danger without a shepherd, unable to provide for themselves, perversely lost and wandering.
 ‘laid’: the same word as ‘intercession’ in **53:12**, indicating a meeting point, where here God causes all the converging lines of our iniquity to meet in him, and there he engages with all that limits and deforms our lives. Thus is full satisfaction made and accepted by God.
- 7–9** ‘Now . . . 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 deciding, accepting and submitting.’ The emphasis here is on ‘the clear-headed, self-restraining voluntariness with which the Servant approached and accepted what happened’ (Motyer).
- 7** The servant is led out to die. Lambs go to the slaughter and sheep submit to shearing without properly knowing what is happening to them—they blindly and dumbly end up going along with it. The servant’s silence in the face of unjust violence and undeserved suffering here is not of this order. He fully knows what he is undergoing, and willingly submits to it.
 Lambs and other animals were designated by God as substitutes for the offerers in the sacrifices of the Old Testament. They were to be without blemish, and they

THIS IS OUR GOD: STUDIES IN THE PROPHECY OF ISAIAH

53:7-9

were accepted by God as holy and effective for bringing the forgiveness, cleansing, peace and fellowship promised by God into the lives of the offerers. But sin is more than just unfortunate failure or moral deficiency, which may be pitied or excused. At heart it is wilful rebellion, which must be confronted and completely turned around, if there is to be any future. This was the true meaning of the Old Testament sacrifices (see Psalm 40:6-8). This was the one thing animals could not supply. 'Only a consenting will can substitute for a rebellious will' (Motyer). Isaiah knew in his own person the power of substitutionary sacrifice to bring cleansing and enabling—it was a burning coal from the altar where the sacrifices were offered that brought him freedom from guilt and forgiveness of sin (**6:5-8**). It took a bold leap for an Old Testament person, however, to see that animal sacrifices could never actually deal with sin at its heart (Hebrews 10:4: 'it is impossible that the blood of bulls and goats could ever take away sin'), but could only ever point to a greater and all-sufficient sacrifice. Perhaps the suffering Isaiah himself underwent on behalf of his people when given this message (**6:5, 9-13**) prepared him for the revelation that he now imparts. In these verses, 'Old Testament and biblical soteriology reaches its climax' (Motyer).

'oppressed': denotes physical brutality.

'he was afflicted': literally means he held himself humbly submissive to this treatment—an act of great power, not of weakness.

8 The servant is executed. As in **53:1-3**, his contemporaries gave no consideration to him in his sufferings and demise, or to the possibility that it was on their account—for their sins, not any of his own—that he was receiving this fatal blow. 'my people': Isaiah's own identification with God's people in their uncleanness (**6:5**) matches the anguished identification of God Himself in the action of the servant.

9 The servant is buried. There is a mystery surrounding the undeserved death of this one: he is treated as one of the wicked, yet is honoured in his death as a person of wealth and power. This matches the contrast between exaltation and abhorrence in **52:13-14**, and relates to the astounding revelation of **52:15, 53:4-6**. The fulfilment of these details in the death of Jesus (Luke 22:37, 23:32-33, Matthew 27:57-60) is another pointer to him as the true Servant of the Lord.

'in his death': literally, 'deaths'. Why the plural? Could it be an indication that the death he died was not just his own, but also was rightfully the death of the 'many' (as in 2 Corinthians 5:14)? There is a Hebrew idiom where the plural denotes greatness or magnification, as in our expression 'I nearly died a thousand deaths'. It certainly indicates that this was no ordinary death, but one of great stature and significance.

'no violence . . . no deceit in his mouth': the total absence of any physical manipulation (contrast **30:12**; see John 18:36), or of 'unclean lips' which give vent and expression to the deceit and filth within (e.g. **6:5, 29:13**, Matthew 15:18-19), qualifies this one well to be the true substitute for sinners.

10-12 These final verses on the servant gather together all the themes of this song, especially those in **52:13-14** (the exaltation-suffering-revelation) and **53:4-6** (the sin-bearing, healing sacrifice). Verse **10** is a prophetic interpretive report,

THIS IS OUR GOD: STUDIES IN THE PROPHECY OF ISAIAH

53:10–12

and in verses **11** and **12** the voice of the Lord Himself pronounces upon the work and worthiness of His servant.

10 This verse is bracketed at both ends by ‘the will of the LORD’: first in bringing the servant to this suffering, and then the servant, on account of it, being the one to whom it is given to carry through the will of the Lord.

‘it was the will of the LORD to bruise him . . . put him to grief’: literally, ‘It was the LORD who willed/delighted/was pleased to bring him to weakness by crushing him.’ This emphasises that above all this was an action of God Himself (compare Mark 14:27; Acts 2:23; Romans 8:3–4; Galatians 3:13 compare Deuteronomy 21:22–23; 2 Corinthians 5:21). Not that God’s delight is in inflicting this, but in being able to provide this one who is capable of bearing purely and in love this necessary infliction on behalf of the many.

‘when he makes himself’: the Hebrew is: ‘You make his soul’. There are various possibilities of meaning, each one enlightening, depending on who the ‘you’ refers to: (1) God delights to put His servant in place as the full and satisfactory offering; (2) the servant willingly puts forward his own very being to carry out this work; (3) the individual addressed appropriates the servant’s offering as being for himself or herself, and enters into its benefits. Perhaps Isaiah left it deliberately ambiguous to include all three.

‘an offering for sin’: see Leviticus 5:14–19, where atonement and reparation is made for offences against God and fellow-humans, by both dealing with sin and bringing into acceptance and righteousness.

‘he shall see his offspring’: compare **49:21**, **54:1–3**, **13**: ‘we stray as sheep (6), we return as children’ (Motyer).

‘he shall prolong his days’: for one who has been ‘cut off out of the land of the living’ (verses **8**, **9**) and who ‘poured out his soul to death’ (verse **12**) this must necessarily entail resurrection from death.

‘the will of the LORD shall prosper in his hand’: in contrast to the departed rulers in **14:9–17**, mere powerless shadows of their former selves, this one in full-blooded sovereignty has in hand the execution of God’s purposeful will in seeing that the full number of the family is gathered in, against all opposition (compare 1 Corinthians 15:20–28).

11 This family, fully gathered to the Father, is ‘the fruit of the travail of his soul’—it is complete, and thoroughly satisfying, to put it mildly.

‘knowledge’: to be able to do this saving work of God, the servant has needed to know the will of the Lord concerning sin and sinners, and how to carry it through.

‘the righteous one’: fully acceptable to the holy God whom our sins have offended.

‘my servant’: fittingly appointed by God to this task.

‘make many to be accounted righteous’: literally ‘provide righteousness for’, i.e. to clothe them in his own righteousness, so that they participate in his own perfect acceptability before God. This is the achievable goal.

‘bear their iniquities’: the means to the goal, the righteousness that is provided through the bearing and removal of sin.

12 ‘I will divide him a portion with the great . . . he shall divide the spoil with the strong’: suggests the servant ends up as one among others. A better and more appropriate translation is: ‘I will apportion to him the many’—that is, all the

THIS IS OUR GOD: STUDIES IN THE PROPHECY OF ISAIAH

53:12–54:5

redeemed children will be his—‘and he will apportion the strong as spoil’—i.e. the ‘kings’ and rulers silenced by his action in **52:15** will be at his disposal.

‘because’: the qualifications of the servant amply fit him for this high position: he voluntarily ‘poured out his soul to death’, he personally identified himself with the transgressors, he shouldered their sin and its full entail in his own body, and thus became the one who ‘made intercession’ (see on verse **6**), that is, the one who has interposed himself to become the meeting between sinful offenders and the intimate presence of the offended God, with no barrier remaining (see Mark 15:38, Ephesians 2:14–18).

Assignment Question 35

What is the task of the servant in 49:1–53:12? How is this task carried through? How are the servant and God related in this action? What are the implications of this work (a) for Israel, (b) for the nations, (c) in your own personal life?

54:1–17 The immediate outcome of God’s saving work through the servant is proclaimed to all in terms of a family (verses 1–5), a marriage (**6–10**), and a city (**11–17**). These are all taken up in the Book of Revelation as the outcome of the work of the Lamb (Revelation 7, 19, 21). The emphasis here is all on response and readiness to receive a finished work that has been accomplished by Another.

1 This picks up the matter of the ‘offspring’ in **53:10** (compare **49:21**). Reference to the ‘barren’ and ‘desolate’ nature of this woman indicates her incapability of having children. Compare Sarah in Genesis 15–18. This means that the great number of children born to her (the ‘many’ of **52:14**, **53:11**, **12** are now the ‘more’ of **54:1**) could not be by natural means, but by a supernatural act of God (compare John 1:12–13).

2–3 ‘enlarge . . . stretch out . . . lengthen . . . spread abroad’: this ‘tent’ imagery harks back to the early days of Israel’s history, and beyond. In Genesis 9:27 it was envisaged that descendants of Shem would need to extend their tent to make room for nations descended from Japheth. This is consistent with the promise made to the patriarch Jacob/Israel in Genesis 28:14. Readiness for this enlarging is to be made on the confident basis of a promise of God.

‘strengthen’: the ‘tent’ is not only enlarged, but also secured.

‘possess the nations’: the promise made to the Messiah in Psalm 2:8 is borne out in **53:12**, and becomes the heritage of the children he has brought to birth (compare Genesis 22:17, Revelation 2:26–27).

‘desolate cities’: remember ‘the city of chaos’ in **24:10**, **12**.

4 This outcome is sure, because the shameful past has been completely dealt with and put away.

5 All this is from the Lord, who has remained faithful through all to His nature and role as Creator-Redeemer, in a permanent relationship deliberately chosen and carried through as Husband of His people (compare Jeremiah 2:1–3, and Hosea 3:1).

‘God of the whole earth’: not just a name, but a practical reality, pertaining to One who can effect such a deliverance against such odds.

THIS IS OUR GOD: STUDIES IN THE PROPHECY OF ISAIAH

54:6–17

- 6–10** The background to the ‘wife’ motif is **50:1–3**, where the ‘mother’ was put away from her husband on account of her ‘iniquities’ and ‘transgressions’. These have no mention or remembrance here: they have been taken away, and the separation has been revoked, through the action of the servant. His bearing of our iniquities and of their chastisement that makes our peace (**53:5**) now has brought us into an unshakeable ‘covenant of peace’ (**54:10**).
- 7–9** A settled change has now taken place with God and in God, by which His forsaking has been reconciled in His great compassion, and His wrath and anger worked through and laid to rest in His everlasting love and faithfulness. So peace and reconciliation has really been made through what was laid on the servant, that he willingly bore. This is personal, and passionate.
‘days of Noah . . . waters of Noah’: both should read ‘waters’ of Noah, i.e. the judgment that came on a world full of evil and violence. The justice effected in the sufferings of the servant is such that anger and rebuke no longer have any place.
- 10** ‘the mountains may depart’: denotes a shaking and disordering of the whole creation, as in **24:1** (compare Psalm 46:2–3, Revelation 6:12–14).
‘covenant’: the word used elsewhere in connection with marriage (Proverbs 2:16–17, Ezekiel 16:8, 59–63, Malachi 2:13–16) is now mentioned explicitly here. Covenant has always been connected with sacrifice (Genesis 8:20–22, 9:8–17, Exodus 24:4–8, Psalm 50:5): ‘peace’ is secured by the death of the servant. This is from God Himself: to still wrath, effect reconciliation, and secure peace, out of His own heart of love.
- 11–17** After family, and marriage, comes the image of the city—a theme especially dear to Isaiah (see on **1:1**, also **1:26**, **2:2–4**, **4:2–6**, **12:1–6**, **24:10**, **25:1–9**, **26:1–6**, **35:10**, **47:1**, **52:1**, **66:10–14**, compare Revelation 21:1–22:5). This city is established in the righteousness (verse **14**) secured by the servant in **53:11**.
- 11–12** Compare Revelation 21:9–21.
- 13–14** ‘taught by the LORD’: compare the servant in **50:4**, contrast **29:9–12**, **42:18–20**.
‘prosperity’: literally ‘abundant peace’ (*shalom*), brought about by the chastisement of the servant in **53:5**.
‘your sons . . . your sons’: the family of offspring created in **53:10**.
‘righteousness’: the city is established in the righteousness from God secured by the servant in **53:11** which then becomes the possession of the city’s inhabitants in verse **17** (‘vindication’ is the same word; ‘justification’ is its New Testament equivalent).
- 15–17** The peace and righteousness secured by God for His people indicate that God no longer has any strife with His people. Attacks will still come, but they will not be from Him. God as sovereign Creator over the weapon, its manufacturer, and the one who uses it, will ensure that any attacks or accusations that now come will be to no avail.
‘servants’: a highly honoured position, for those highly qualified by God.

Assignment Question 36

Trace in chapter 54 the themes of family, marriage, and the city. How do these relate to the work of the Servant in 52:13–53:12?

THIS IS OUR GOD: STUDIES IN THE PROPHECY OF ISAIAH

55:1–11

- 55:1–13** A favourite chapter, with a most heartening message, rich in natural imagery, inviting a personal response of one and all to all the benefits of the servant's finished work.
- 1** A threefold 'come' invites the hearer to a rich feast: refreshing and life-giving water (equated with the Spirit of God in **44:3**, compare John 7:37–39, Revelation 22:17), wine of joyful celebration (as at the feast for all nations in **25:6–9**, where death and the reproach of sin has been removed), and milk (as in the promised land of Exodus 3:8). A corresponding threefold 'Hearken . . . Incline your ear . . . hear' in verses **2–3** shows that this has to do with hearing and receiving the word of the Lord's salvation.
'no money . . . without money and without price': highlights the poverty and need of those who come, and the rich freedom of the provision. But the word 'buy' tells that this is no hand-out, but a costly transaction, fully paid for in the deep sufferings and death of the servant, and by his victory there.
- 2** Those who come have clearly been wasting their resources on what can never satisfy them: the 'feeding on ashes' of idolatry in **44:20**.
- 3** 'come to me': this hearing brings the hearers into a personal relationship with God. This is life (compare John 17:3) in the blessings of an 'everlasting covenant', constituted as the relationship of God in 'steadfast sure love' with his Messiah 'David' (compare Psalm 89:1–4, 33–37, 49).
- 4** This 'David' is a world ruler. The designation of him as a 'witness' (compare Revelation 1:5, 19:11–16), and the call to 'hear', identifies him with the servant of **49:1**, **50:4**, **10–11**, see also Psalm 18:49–50. The hearers here are invited to participate with him in his witness and world rule (compare **43:10**, also John 15:26–27, Romans 4:13, Revelation 1:6, 2:26–27, 5:9–10, 21:7).
- 5** 'nations that you know not': compare Psalm 18:43. The attraction is the Lord Himself, in the glory that He has given to His people (compare **49:7**).
- 6–13** A three-part call to repentance (verses **6–7**) is followed by three reasons why this call is to be trusted and heeded (**8–9**, **10–11**, **12–13**).
- 6–7** There is a season now where God has made Himself able to be found by those who turn to Him. His 'mercy', the love surging in His heart, is freely available. The desperate need still there will be shown in chapters **56–66**. Since 'there is no peace for the wicked' (**48:22**), it is necessary for the wicked to renounce their way of life, and the way of thinking that is behind it, and receive God's objective pardon and forgiveness of sins.
- 8–9** This is not saying that God is mysteriously transcendent; nor just that God does not take vengeance as we might. It is saying that there is a great moral gulf fixed, like the vast height of the sky above the earth, between the ways and thoughts of the holy God and the ways and thoughts of sinful humanity, (that Isaiah became aware of in **6:3**, **5**, compare **55:7a**), that can only be crossed by God's atonement and our repentance. Hence the call to 'return to the LORD'.
- 10–11** The image of the sky above the earth is not just one of separation, but also one of blessing and fruitfulness. Both seed and harvest are brought about by rain from above: God is the Giver of all. No less is the word spoken by God (see verses **2–**

3) the effective agent of all His purposes, including the bringing back of His people in repentance to Himself.

12–13 The peace and joy of a new inner relationship with God is given, in the context of a renewed creation from which the curse (Genesis 3:17–19) has been removed (compare **41:19**, **65:17**, **66:22**, Matthew 19:28, Romans 8:19–21, 2 Peter 3:13, Revelation 21:1), shot through with allusions to the exodus and the return from captivity and exile. This new creation, peopled with transformed human beings, will be a testimony to the name and inner being of God. This will be what has been accomplished through the servant.

Assignment Question 37

Look at each of the images in chapter 55: water, wine and milk; heavens above the earth; rain and snow on the earth; trees of the field. How does each of these illustrate the central matter of God's covenant in verse 3?

THE ANOINTED CONQUEROR—56:1–66:24

Chapters **56–66**, according to Alec Motyer's analysis, constitute a third part of the Book of Isaiah, focussing on an Anointed Conqueror (along with chapters **1–37**, on the King, and **38–55**, on the Servant). Again (see 'One Isaiah, or three?', page 2), there have been attempts by scholars who discount the possibility of predictive prophecy to attribute this to yet a third author or school of writers (called 'Trito-Isaiah'), dating from the period after the return from exile in 539 B.C. (whereas the original Isaiah prophesied around 700 B.C.). This in spite of the fact that, for example, **57:3–9** and **65:2–5** address issues that were extant in Isaiah's own day and not in the later period. If **56–66** relates to any particular historical period, it is after the return from exile in Babylon (see **48:20–22**), addressed to those who are in a position to benefit from the servant's ministry, who are accounted righteous (**53:11**) and are secure against accusation and attack (**54:17**). But by now Isaiah has left far behind specific references, such as those to Ahaz in **7:1**, or to Egypt in **31:1**, or to Babylon in **43:14**. Isaiah is now dealing with broad principles that apply across the whole sweep of God's salvation-history, while still being rooted in contemporary issues of his day. As such, it remains very pertinent to our own situation today.

These final chapters can be divided into three main sections. **56:1–59:13** sees the need for the redeemed people to be rescued from ever-present sin and failure and from the still persisting attacks of their enemies, as they await the final outcome of their salvation. **59:14–63:6** is the Lord's personal and lone commitment to the carrying through of this salvation and its necessary accompanying vengeance. In **63:7–66:24**, God's people, on this basis, rise up to prayer, and are met with the Lord's pledge that He will do all that He has promised, through to the establishment of the new heavens and the new earth.

Does not this match our situation exactly? Who among us, who have been redeemed to God in the Servant, is not painfully aware of the continuing presence of sin, failure, and constant attack? Whom can we rely on to see us through but God Himself alone? And who is not thereby urged to earnest prayer for the ultimate consummation of God's mighty rule among all the nations, as the wonders of that coming kingdom are opened out to us more and more?

The Lord's People in Sin and Opposition 56:1–59:13

- 56:1–8** A wonderfully embracing depiction of the universal covenant people of God, brought into being through the work of the servant. While it is thoroughly inclusive, it is on the basis of a distinctive righteousness in close dependence upon God. Isaiah consistently opposed Israel's decline from this to be involved in compromising alliances with other nations (which inevitably resulted in the practices of **2:5–8**) so that the purity and wonder of Israel's life with their God could be that attraction to the nations that it was intended to be (as in **2:2–4**).
- 1** 'do righteousness . . . my salvation': literally 'my righteousness' (same word, *tsedaqah*). We are to be and to do as God is, as will be fully revealed (see 2 Corinthians 5:21; 1 John 2:29–3:3).
 'deliverance': the coming of God's righteousness is accompanied by His deliverance from sin, with the wreaking of just judgement on enemies, as we shall see in this whole section.
- 2** 'does . . . holds . . . keeps': continuous persevering action (as in Mark 13:13, Revelation 2–3)
 'keeps the sabbath': not in a formal legalistic way, as in **1:13**, but as a positive reordering of the whole of life around worship and obedience to God, and so also refraining from wrong personal behaviour: 'keeps his hand from doing any evil'. The Sabbath was ever meant to be a participation by us in the nature and being and restful action of God (see Genesis 2:3, John 5:16–18).
- 3–6** The blessing in verse **2** is open to all who hold to God's righteousness and deliverance, in other words, who have faith in God in His covenant being and promises and action, and so persevere in faith and obedience. The inclusiveness of this is spelled out here with the test cases of the disfigured and unfruitful eunuch, and the non-Israelite foreigner, where the exclusion of Deuteronomy 23:1–6 (intended to safeguard the purity) is superseded by Genesis 12:1–3 and Exodus 12:48–49 (guaranteeing the inclusiveness).
- 5** 'in my house . . . within my walls': right inside, sharing in the Lord's own 'name' (compare **55:13**).
- 6** 'minister': possibly as equivalent of priests and Levites, as in **66:21**. Not just as an official function, but in a personal loving devotion, such as Isaiah himself had come into at the altar of the Lord (in **6:7–8**).
- 7** 'a house of prayer for all peoples': affirmed in Jesus at Mark 11:15–17
- 8** 'outcasts of Israel': those of His people who have been far from the Lord. These are now to be joined by 'yet others', as in **49:6** (and John 10:14–16).
- 9–12** Suddenly we are in a very different atmosphere: leaders are indulging themselves at the expense of exercising their proper responsibilities. They think they are having the time of their lives, feasting away. But God has already called the wild beasts to feast—on them!
- 9** 'beasts': recalls the desolation under judgment of the 'No Kingdom There' in **34:8–17** (compare Ezekiel 39:17–20, **66:24**).
- 10–11** The leaders are ignorantly unfit for their position: they 'do not know' satisfaction or discernment, they have nothing to say, and they lie down on the job. Nevertheless, they continue to devour resources, with nothing to show for it

THIS IS OUR GOD: STUDIES IN THE PROPHECY OF ISAIAH

56:11–57:19

except their own advantage. These who are meant to be watchful ‘shepherds’, guarding and caring for the flock, end up no better than ‘dogs’, looking after and caring for themselves.

12 They console themselves with drinking wine, and thinking all is well. Their ‘Come’ has already been ominously fore-echoed by God’s own invitation to the beasts in verse **9**.

So the present reality is still a far cry from what is to be according to God’s redemptive purpose in **56:1–8**, and the needs are very great.

57:1–21 Having looked at the leadership in **56:9–12**, we now look at the people, where the oppressed righteous (verses **1–2**) are seen in the context of the adultery and prostitution of the people’s idolatrous unfaithfulness to God (**3–13**). This is contrasted with the God’s gathering of His people to Himself (**13–19**), and the restlessness of the wicked (**20–21**). The servant has come, with the forgiveness of sins, but the situation of wrong, error, evil and continuing oppression call for specific acts of judgement and deliverance by God. These are the very sins that were extant in Isaiah’s own day, as seen in the earlier part of the book, and do not need the postulation of a later post-exile ‘Trito-Isaiah’ to explain them.

1–2 Just as the servant suffered and no one cared or considered him (**53:8**), so the ‘righteous’ (or justified) person (singular) and the ‘devout’ people (plural) of God’s steadfast covenant-love now suffer without regard. Through their death or disappearance, however, they are actually being taken away from calamity before it comes, into blessedness and peace. So death has no terror for them, such is God’s care for them in their uprightness.

3–5 1 Kings 14:23–24 tells of how the people of Judah indulged in the local Canaanite idolatrous fertility practices of ritual prostitution and sacrifice of children from the time of Rehoboam the son of Solomon. In Isaiah’s time those who practiced these things were officially encouraged by the kings Ahaz and Manasseh (2 Kings 16:3–4, 21:3, 6). Here they are called ‘sons of the sorceress’ (engaged in the occult) and ‘offspring of the adulterer and the harlot’—unfaithful to the covenant God. When ‘the will and glory of God in worship’ is replaced by ‘the satisfaction and the excitement of the worshipper’ (Motyer, p. 472), then we are far gone.

6–13 The people here are envisaged as the prostitute herself. She ends up giving herself to the equivalent of eroded misshapen slippery rocks in the deep creek-bed. For she blatantly solicits custom publicly, under the guise of true religion (see ‘doorposts’ in Deuteronomy 6:9), just as Judah sought to form illicit military liaisons with the kings of Assyria and Egypt (e.g. Ahaz in 2 Kings 16:7), against the only true security of trusting the covenant God, and sought to strengthen themselves from their own resources. God’s forbearance only resulted in their forgetfulness and lack of holy fear (compare Psalm 50:21, Ecclesiastes 8:11), but when God’s judgment comes, their ‘collection’ (the word ‘idols’ is not mentioned) will not be able to stop them from being blown away.

13–19 By contrast, those who by faith take refuge in the true security that is God and His covenant-promises will abide in their true home and come into the presence of God. This is the same ‘high and lifted up’ holy God that Isaiah saw in **6:1–5**, who dwells eternally, but who is not compromised in order to dwell with the

THIS IS OUR GOD: STUDIES IN THE PROPHECY OF ISAIAH

57:19–58:14

‘contrite and humble in spirit’, but who by some unexplained action of His own being comes to the end of his anger and brings people to new life, healing, comfort and peace.

19 ‘Peace, peace, to the far and the near’: taken by Paul in Eph. 2:17 to be Christ bringing the gospel to both Gentiles and Jews.

20–21 Meanwhile (compare **48:22**) there is no such peace or rest for the unjustified wicked—only the churning up of their defilement.

58:1–14 An exposure of false religion. To understand this, we need to understand the nature and place of the Sabbath in God’s scheme of things (see verses **13–14**). The sabbath rest, of one day in every seven, is given by God as part of the creational mandate (Genesis 2:2–3, Exodus 16:22–30), and in the ten commandments is linked with participation in the holy blessing of God’s own restful perfection (Exodus 20:8–11), and with participation in God’s liberation of the oppressed (Deuteronomy 5:12–15). These two things go together, and lie at the heart of true religion.

1 A clarion call is to go out from the prophet to make God’s people aware of their sins.

2 It is not as if the people are not religious—they are very much so, and to all appearances rightly so.

3–4 Especially are they assiduous in the matter of fasting and self-deprivation, even though there was only one fast day a year prescribed by the law—the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16:31, 23:26–32). Here it becomes evident what the underlying motivation for all this religious activity is: not to gladly obey God in a faith-relationship with Him, but by human actions to seek to put pressure on the deity for the advantage of the worshipper. This was the pattern of Canaanite worship, and of all idolatry. Being self-centred rather than other-centred, this inevitably issues in conflict, and has nothing to do with truly calling upon God.

5 This becomes as formalistic and mechanical as a reed being blown up and down in the wind, and cannot be pleasing to God.

6–7 In keeping with God’s own being and action, the sabbath-principle of liberating the oppressed is affirmed, both as broad long-term social policy, and as caring actions that can be carried through immediately, even with members of one’s own family.

8–9 This will result in light and healing out of darkness and infirmity, with God’s own righteousness and glory as an all-surrounding protection, and a direct and obliging relationship with God.

9–12 Similarly, if this pure social conscience, given full-bodied and costly expression, is accompanied by the removal of all personally obnoxious habits of putting undue pressure on other people, accusation, and malicious gossip, then out of the darkness of confusion and perplexity will come clear guidance, provision and restoration.

13–14 The observance of the sabbath is thus affirmed, not as an obligation, not as yet another way of surreptitiously bringing pressure on God by our own action to bring about our own advantage, but as a way of honouring and delighting in God’s will, and in His own person, in keeping with the stature and authority and

THIS IS OUR GOD: STUDIES IN THE PROPHECY OF ISAIAH

58:14–59:13

dignity God ever intended for human beings, and promised to the covenant-descendants of Jacob.

- 59:1–13** A detailing of the transgressions and sins declared in **58:1**: accusations (**1–4**) and description (**5–8**) give rise to confession on the part of those who see and acknowledge their sin (**9–13**).
- 1–2** **58:2–3** made it clear that the religion of the people, assiduous as it was, was a perverse attempt to put pressure on God for the advantage of the worshipper. Their wonderings about why this has not ‘worked’ are answered here. It is not that the Lord was unable to act or to hear, but that such self-seeking sin not only unnaturally separates the sinner from God and His ways, but also the offended God personally refuses to show Himself or listen as long as this situation obtains.
- 3–4** The personal defilement of false and sinful actions and words that do harm to others renders them unfit for converse with God, and gives rise to the perverse and hollow public actions that inevitably come from a corrupted heart that is set against trusting the Lord.
- 5–8** The address now turns from ‘you’ in the plural to ‘they’, as the unreliability and destructiveness of such thoughts and actions are exposed. ‘Adders’ eggs’ and ‘the spider’s web’ represent the best that our sinful efforts can provide (see Geoffrey C. Bingham, *Strong as the Sun*, (1994) and *Ah, Strong, Strong Love!* (1993), published by NCPI). For those intent on evil, twisting their own paths, bringing breakdown of order and community relationships, there can never be any peace (compare **48:22**, **57:20–21**).
- 9–13** It is ‘we’ who now speak, as Isaiah and those with him once again speak with and for the people (compare **6:5**, **53:6**) in repentance for sin.
- 9–10** The darkness is not only the refusal and absence of God’s light (see **2:5**, **9:2**, **30:26**, **42:6**, **49:6**), but the sin-engendered blindness and lack of vision that can only be healed by divine intervention.
- 11** The bitter growling at injustice and the deep moaning over the world’s desperate and helpless situation, longing for God’s action, corresponds with the groaning of the Lord Jesus (Mark 7:34, John 11:38), the groanings of a creation dogged by futility, that the redeemed feel within themselves (Romans 8:22–23) and the saving-interceding groanings of the Spirit of God within the believer’s heart (Romans 8:26).
- 12–13** Personal guilt is fully and openly acknowledged, in terms that do not draw back from the inner and outer heinousness of sin.

This sets the scene and prepares the way for the coming of the Anointed Conqueror.

Assignment Question 38

Enumerate the sins of the people in 56:9–57:13a; 58:1–5; 59:1–8. What is the position and role of the faithful in this, as in 56:1–8; 57:13b–21; 58:6–14; 59:9–13?

What does this tell us about our own day?

The Anointed Conqueror Comes—59:14–63:6

The foregoing account of the dire condition of the Lord's world-wide people, attacked by enemies and helpless in sin, sets the scene for the Lord to act who alone can bring salvation to the Lord's people and vengeance on their enemies. This happens in the appearance of an individual, whose four songs (**59:21**, **61:1–3**, **61:10–62:7** and **63:1–6**) parallel those of the servant in the previous section (**42:1–9**, **49:1–13**, **50:4–11**, **52:13–53:12**). Each of these songs is followed by an oracle on the coming glory of Zion, as the goal of the anointed conqueror's work.

- 59:14–20** The personal intervention of the Lord into a helpless situation to bring salvation and just retribution.
- 14–15b** Summary of the situation reached in the preceding passage of the complete moral collapse of justice and truth in public and private life, which leaves no quarter for those who are upright, but rather endangers them.
- 15c–17** We see here God's personal displeasure and abhorrence at sin, and His recognition of our helplessness in it. The putting-on of His clothing and armour for battle is the showing-forth of who He is within Himself, and his determination and ability to act accordingly. Thus when Paul in Ephesians 6:10–20 speaks of 'the armour of God', it is standing in what God has done to save us, rather than something we take to ourselves.
'intervene': means to interpose Himself between us and the entail of our moral collapse (see on **53:6, 12**).
- 18** The day of reckoning that must come between God and those who persist in remaining opposed to Him is here carried through, to the ends of the earth.
- 19** The dominant evil and injustice of **59:14–15b** is thereby replaced with the fear of the Lord, which issues in joyful obedience.
'for he will come like a rushing stream which the wind of the Lord drives': an alternative translation could be: 'When an adversary comes streaming in, the Spirit of the Lord lifts a banner against him'.
- 20** This happens as the Lord comes as Deliverer to embattled Zion, for the vindication of those whose hearts and lives are towards Him.
- 21** The first song of the anointed conqueror. At the heart of God's commitment is His covenant, promised to 'them' (plural), and at the centre of this covenant is one whom the Lord calls 'you' (singular), who has 'children' for whom this covenant is secured. Immediately we think of the likeness of this one to the servant (see covenant references in **42:6**, **49:8**, **54:10** and **55:3**, and **53:10** for the servant's 'offspring'). As with the servant (see **42:1–4**, **49:1–2**, **50:4**), here the Spirit is given for a ministry of the word that brings deep comfort.
'says the LORD' (said twice): secures the promise with strong emphasis.
- 60:1–22** After this introduction of the anointed conqueror comes a vision of the outcome of his work in terms of a renewed and glorified city to which the nations are drawn (compare **2:2–3**, **35:10**, **45:14**, **19:23–25**, **27:12–13**). In fulfilment of the covenant promise to Abraham and Israel (Genesis 12:3, 27:29), the destiny of the

THIS IS OUR GOD: STUDIES IN THE PROPHECY OF ISAIAH

60:1–22

nations now depends upon their response to what God has done among His people (verse 12).

- 1–3** The ‘glory of the LORD’, in His coming to Zion as Redeemer to all who repent, and His placing in their midst the covenant mediator who imparts God’s word and Spirit, becomes ‘your light’: not just that which shines on you, but that which shines from you (compare 2 Corinthians 3:18). This evident work of God in the midst of His people will be what attracts the nations out of their all-pervading darkness, in answer to the invitation in **55:1**. Thus through His chosen people God effects what has ever been His purpose for the whole world.
‘nations . . . kings’: compare **49:7, 52:15**.
- 4–5** As in **49:17–23**, this is the response of God’s people to this marvellous influx. Neither distance, nor inability to walk, nor even the oceans, will be an obstacle to this world-wide gathering. Those who come will bring their treasures (compare Revelation 21:24–26), even from ‘the sea’, which may represent all that has been traditionally opposed to God (see **51:10**, Psalm 93).
- 6–7** An evocative listing of names of far-flung countries, some formerly enemies of Israel, highlight the streaming of the nations into the city, now bearing acceptable offerings of gold, incense, and sacrificial animals for the worship of God in the temple. The arrival of foreigners from the east with similar gifts at the birth of Jesus (Matthew 2:1–12) is a sign of the fulfilment of this prophecy (though no ‘camels’ are mentioned in Matthew!).
- 8–9** If ‘Tarshish’ is indeed in Spain, then from the west as well as the east, from the farthest reaches of ‘the coastlands’ (compare **42:4**) across the seas, these nations will come, as instinctively as homing pigeons. But this is to nothing less than the character of God in His holiness and His redeeming and glorifying action (which would mean the letting-go of all that is not that).
- 10–14** On each side of the key verse **12** (see above), the foreigners participate as full citizens, serving in the building up of the city (**10–11**) and submissive in the beautifying of the sanctuary where God dwells in His holiness.
‘wrath . . . favour . . . mercy’: the attraction is because this city is the one place where the wrath of God that is on the whole sinful human race has been turned to grace and forgiveness.
‘Your gates shall be open’: compare Revelation 21:24–27.
- 15–18** Two contrasts denote the change that will occur in the inward and outward condition of God’s people: from abandonment and enmity to honoured and intimate fellowship in the knowledge of God, and from base adornment to that which is highly prized, as oppressive and destructive leadership is transformed to that which makes for peace and righteousness that matches God’s own, in the dependable security of God’s salvation that gives rise to the responsive activity of praise.
- 19–22** Compare Revelation 21:23, 22:5. The fitful coming and going of sun and moon are replaced by the constant beautifying splendour of God’s presence.
‘days of mourning’: compare Revelation 7:15–17, 21:3–4.
‘righteous . . . my planting’: anticipating **61:3**. The making, choosing and placing of God’s people in this great company are all the work of God.
‘The least one shall become a clan’: compare Leviticus 26:8, a reversal of **30:17**.

THIS IS OUR GOD: STUDIES IN THE PROPHECY OF ISAIAH

61:1-7

'hasten': may also mean 'enjoy', expressing God's delight in the joy He has brought us to.

- 61:1-4** The second song of the anointed conqueror. As in the second servant song (**49:1-6**), he himself speaks of the ministry God has given him. This entails both the 'favour' and 'vengeance' of God (verse **2**), as undertaken by God Himself in **59:15-20**. This engagement by the anointed one in the action of God Himself is significant. As in **59:21**, he comes with both the Spirit and the word (verse **1**). These are the words Jesus applied to himself in Luke 4:16-21. As this was at the beginning of his ministry, when he had come to make known the action of salvation, prior to the day of judgement, there he stopped when he got to 'the LORD's favour'. His personal engagement with 'the day of vengeance' (on the cross) and its final outworking on all who would not take refuge in him, were yet to come.
- 1** 'the Lord GOD': asserting the sovereignty of the God who revealed Himself at the time of the Exodus as YHWH ('I AM'), who rescues His people and destroys their enemies.
- 'broken-hearted . . . captives': those suffering from inner or outward oppression.
- 2** 'the year of the LORD's favour': the jubilee of release, see Leviticus 25:10. The 'year' as an extended period is contrasted with the 'day' of what is quickly done and finished (compare Rev. 20:1-10, where the devil's 'little while' is contrasted with Christ's 'thousand years').
- 3** 'those who mourn': could be general sadness, but **57:18** makes it more likely to be those who grieve over sin in repentance, who are brought into release and joy. 'ashes' and 'garland' use the same letters in Hebrew: there is a direct substitution. 'oil of gladness': a sign of refreshed gladness (as in Psalm 23:5); in Psalm 45:7 an attribute of the king (Messiah) himself.
- 'mantle': that which totally envelops the wearer.
- 'oaks of righteousness': see on **60:21**. Literally 'big trees', under which false religion was practised, now transplanted in God's holy place of true worship, participating in His own active being.
- 4** The rebuilding of Jerusalem on return from exile in Babylon is used as a picture of recovery from the ravages of sin and restoration to our God-intended state in the taking up of possession and residence in God's kingdom.
- 5-9** As in what follows the second servant song (**49:7-12**), here is an affirmation by God of the anointed one's work, in terms of the nations coming under the rule of God and His people (verses **5-7**), and of God's commitment to the covenant of His own being (**8-9**).
- 5-7** 'priests': a fulfilment of Exodus 19:6, which indicates the relationship of Israel to the other nations (see numbers 18, compare Romans 15:27), and looks towards **66:21**, 1 Peter 2:9 and Revelation 1:6, where those of all nations exercise this ministry towards God with respect to the whole of creation.
- 7** Has a mixture of 'you' and 'they', 'their' and 'theirs' in Hebrew, which some translations attempt to harmonise, but which are probably better left as they are, as God speaks for Himself with regard to His people.

THIS IS OUR GOD: STUDIES IN THE PROPHECY OF ISAIAH

61:8–62:9

- 8** 'robbery and wrong': literally 'robbery with a burnt offering', i.e. holding back something of what is to be totally devoted to God (or compare **1:13**: 'solemn assemblies with iniquity'), when God has devoted Himself totally to us, with no half measures, in His 'everlasting covenant'.
- 9** This will make such a transforming difference to the people that, in this 'year of favour' before the 'day of vengeance', they will be so obviously blessed by God as to be an attraction to all who acknowledge God's action in their midst.
- 61:10-62:7** This third song of the anointed conqueror, like the third servant song (**50:4–9**), focuses on his commitment to God's cause of salvation and righteousness. It looks towards what will be achieved.
- 61:10–11** In **59:16–17**, The Lord Himself wore these garments of salvation towards us, and of righteousness in keeping with God's own being. Now they are entrusted to this one, who wears them to great effect. Not this time as garments of battle, but most strikingly as wedding garments, denoting a covenant action (compare **61:8**), referred to again in **62:4–5**.
The 'garland' that the bridegroom wears is in fact a priestly head-dress. The marriage is a holy relationship, with ramifications for the relationship of the whole earth to God.
Spontaneously, according to God's own nature, and in a cultivated way, according to His assiduous care, is produced the fruit of God's righteousness in the salvation of a people who testify to His praise (compare **43:21**).
- 62:1–3** This one is committed to unceasing prayer and sustained action to see the blazing brilliance of God's salvation in His people evident to all the earth, with a new name signifying their new nature and new potential. God's people are God's 'crown' and 'diadem': not worn by Him, but held (kept and protected) in His hand, as the sign that He is King in all the earth.
- 4–5** This new name of 'My delight is in her' and 'Married' will replace the former appellations of 'Forsaken' and 'Desolate', as the Lord's relationship with His people is described again in terms of a wedding and the ensuing honeymoon and life together.
- 6–7** Just as the anointed one himself engaged in unceasing prayer and action, so now he appoints those with him to be with him in this. God has built in to the way He operates that prayer on our part should be an indispensable ingredient in His saving action (compare Revelation 5:8, 8:3–5). Those who pray in this way are the true active guardians of God's people and purposes (see Luke 2:36–38, 21:36). This praying is to be persistent, day and night, unrelenting, pressing upon God to fulfil His promises right up to the time that it happens. The establishing of Jerusalem as a 'praise' in all the earth is the saving of the world.
- 62:8–12** In confirmation of the anointed one's ministry, God makes an undertaking and issues a summons.
- 8–9** For those used to frequent devastating invasions (such as in Judges 6:1–4), as the people were in Isaiah's time, this would come as welcome security. Such invasions were an inherent part of the operation of the covenant when this was contravened (see Leviticus 26:16). But now the curse has been removed, and the people are able to feast and celebrate with God, not just in a token way with the

THIS IS OUR GOD: STUDIES IN THE PROPHECY OF ISAIAH

62:9–63:6

first-fruits and peace offerings (as in Deuteronomy 26:1–11 and Leviticus 7:11–15), but as a permanent way of life in God’s presence, encompassing the entire harvest and the whole of life.

- 10–12** The way is clear and unmistakable for the world pilgrims to come in and be welcomed by the inhabitants of Zion as co-redeemed and holy to the Lord, who as their next-of-kin has settled all their debts (compare **35:10**). The message that goes out is that this anointed one is the earth’s salvation in person, bearing with him the full price and fruit of his work, that was previously (**40:10**) in the hand of the Lord (see John 5:22: all jurisdiction given to the Son by the Father). All this is the action of God, who has done all that was necessary to seek out His people and ensure that they would never be alone or abandoned.
- 63:1–6** The fourth and final song of the anointed conqueror, announcing his victory, and his personal involvement in that, of battling with and putting down the resisting powers of evil. Here is the fulfilment of the Lord’s own undertaking in **59:15–19** to come with rescue and retribution (see also **61:2**). We have seen the anointed one’s ministry of relational vindication towards the redeemed. Here the focus is on the day of judgement. We may recoil at this sobering outcome, but we do well to leave it in the Lord’s hands. In the wrath of holy love it may not be otherwise, as long as there is entrenched resistance to the reign of grace. Consistently in the New Testament also (see e.g. Matthew 25:46, Revelation 6:15–17, 14:17–20, 19:15), there cannot be a year of salvation without the day of judgement. This, unlike the first three songs, is not followed by a separate prophecy on the coming glory of Zion. This part is played by the rest of the book, which is the third and final part of this section.
- 63:1** The message has gone out that God’s salvation is coming in person, but as in **52:8, 10, 13, 53:1**, the figure that appears is unexpected and unrecognisable. The country of ‘Edom’ (‘red’) and its city of ‘Bozrah’ (‘vintage’) are by now symbols of those who are determined to the end in their resistance to God and His love (see **34:5–6**). The watchmen see one striding in vivid array and undiminished strength, more than equal to the task, ‘announcing vindication, mighty to save’.
- 2–3** It is told them that the deep stain on his garments is the defiled blood of those who have been trodden under foot in his just and personal anger and wrath, as he has executed the judgement in solitary aloneness (as in **59:16**). Here we see that the work of 1 Corinthians 15:24–28 is no sanitised detachment, but a profound engagement in the murky contest (see also Revelation 19:11–21). Yet he himself remains glorious in his righteousness (verse **1**).
- 4–6** The full story is told, from a heart of fierce love.
 ‘the year of my redemption’ could mean ‘the year of my redeemed’: this action is for those who have already been redeemed; it is not the action that makes them so, which has already been carried through by the servant. As in **59:16–17**, the anointed conqueror is personally appalled at the horror of unrepentant sin, and is alone in his dealing with it.
 ‘I made them drunk in my wrath’: compare **51:17, 21–22**.
 ‘I poured out their lifeblood on the earth’: so that it could not be retrieved. The work of judgement is finished and complete.

Assignment Question 39

What is the ministry of the Anointed Conqueror in 59:21; 61:1–3; 61:10–62:7 and 63:1–6? How does this relate to God's undertaking in 59:14–20? What is the outcome for 'Zion' in 60:1–22; 61:4–9; 62:8–12?

The people pray, and the Lord promises a new heaven and a new earth—63:7–66:24

In the light of the promised intervention of the anointed conqueror in **59:14–63:6**, the people are emboldened to pray, as he has appointed them to (**62:6–7**), according to his own prayer (**62:1**), and God responds in the sureness of the promises made according to His own being and action.

63:7–64:12 These are the words of one who has been placed on the walls as a watchman to 'put the LORD in remembrance' (**62:6**), for 'I will recount' in **63:7** is the same word, literally 'I will put in remembrance'. The basis of all prayer in the being and known action of God (**63:7–14**) is followed by a prayer of confession and intercession (**63:15–64:12**).

63:7 Bracketed by references to God's 'steadfast love' (in the plural: all-embracing and never-failing, in abundance), are the setting-forth of God's 'praises' (praiseworthy actions), 'goodness . . . granted' (provision for all needs), and His heart-felt 'mercy' or compassion (as in **54:7–8**).

8–9 Harking back to the time of the Exodus, God's choice and election of His people as His own children (Exodus 4:22, 6:7), and His saving of them through the Red Sea (Exodus 14:30) are rehearsed. God being their Father also entails Him as being their Kinsman-Redeemer, as in **63:16**. God's expectation of them that they would be faithful was to be bitterly disappointed (verse **10**). Nevertheless He identified Himself with them even in their great distress: 'in all their affliction he was afflicted' appears to be the better translation (rather than 'he did not afflict'). 'the angel of his presence': a revelation in saving action of God Himself. See Exodus 3:2; 23:20–23; 32:34; 33:2, 14, and Genesis 48:16. 'lifted them up and carried them': emphasises the totality of God's action towards us.

10 The people's deliberate and hurtful rebellion against this holy and personal heart of God places them in a position of enmity against God, and God in a position of active enmity against them (compare Ephesians 4:30). This is indeed a perilous and apparently intractable situation.

11 In the midst of God's hostile actions comes the sudden remembrance of His own faithfulness to Moses and his people (as in verse **8**, see also Exodus 2:24). The words that follow, to the end of verse **14**, would appear to be God's own recollection.

'shepherds': Moses and Aaron (as in Psalm 77:19–20).

'in the midst of them his holy Spirit': perhaps a reference to the presence of God in the tabernacle (see Exodus 29:44–46).

12–14 The passing through the Red Sea, the crossing of the wilderness, and entry to the promised land, beautifully depicted with images of horse and cattle, and the protective and effective leading of God's Spirit.

THIS IS OUR GOD: STUDIES IN THE PROPHECY OF ISAIAH

63:14–64:7

- ‘a glorious name’: Moses and the prophets, as those who interceded, were well aware that God had staked His reputation on the outcome of His actions with His people Israel, and that if they were no more, there would be no witness to God’s ‘name’, the glory of His being and action.
- 15** On this basis of who God is, towards such a recalcitrant people, the one who prays speaks now to God in words reminiscent of those used by Solomon in his great covenant prayer at the dedication of the temple (see 1 Kings 8:30).
 ‘holy and glorious habitation’: the unimaginable moral and relational splendour of the dimension inhabited by such a God.
 ‘zeal and might’: God’s determination and ability to carry through His promises.
 ‘withheld’: in spite of the people’s terrible apostasy and sin, nevertheless the remedy lies with God alone. It is nothing in them that prevents God’s compassion and yearning heart from coming into operation, but God’s own withholding of them according to the way He operates. On this basis, then, God can be appealed to for a change of action.
- 16** Not that the people have anything of their own that can commend them. Even their founding patriarchs Abraham and Jacob would disown them. Their hope lies only in God’s continuing relationship with them, from His own Fatherhood-Redeemer-Kinship. There is that built into God’s Fatherhood from before the beginning that would not let suffering children remain unredeemed but would move out in saving action (compare Matthew 7:9–11). It is to this alone that appeal is made.
- 17** Such is the offence of God’s people in hardening their hearts against God, that this has now become God’s judgement on them, such that they cannot now know or live in the truth (as with Pharaoh in Egypt, see Romans 9:15–18, compare **6:9–10**). Only a change and relenting on the part of God can reverse this.
 ‘servants . . . heritage’: reminding God of His undertaking in **54:17**.
- 18** The treading down by the adversaries will be matched by that of the anointed conqueror (**63:6**).
- 19** A full and honest confession before God of the parlous state of the people.
64:1–3 ‘O that you would . . .’: reads better as ‘O that you *had* . . .’—if only! How could You have let such a situation become as desperate as this? We may think this sounds presumptuous, but it fits with a true acknowledgment of the full sovereignty of God. There are times when we cannot see why things should have been allowed to get as bad as they have, but it is to God that these issues must be urgently directed, in giving full credence to the destructive and transforming presence of God.
- 4–5** The burning question is posed: given the way God is, and the persistent sinfulness of the people, is there any way that they could ever be ultimately saved? The answer is by no means a foregone conclusion. We need to know the nature of this God, who is the only one there is, the one we are faced with: He works for those who remain in faith with Him, He has come to meet those who are glad to do right (compare the tenses of Acts 5:32: ‘the Holy Spirit whom God *has given* to those who *obey* him’), to those whose minds are conformed to God’s ways.
- 6–7** The unclean filth and decaying deadness of sin are fully admitted, and the casual disinterest and disinclination from which God turns away to hand over or melt down people into the consequences that await them.

8–12 The nature and relationship of God as Father (see **63:16**) is appealed to again. Only God's consistency and faithfulness as sovereign Creator, who has owned them still as His people, can be any grounds for their hope. The events foreseen in **39:5–7** are envisaged as having already happened. Jerusalem, meant to be mirroring heaven (**63:15**) as the 'holy and beautiful' dwelling-place of God among His people, is desecrated and ruined. There is nothing we can do about this any more. The question must be left directed to God, and the outcome is to be entirely up to Him. As He has actively 'withheld' (**63:15**) His yearning heart and compassion to bring this about, will He continue to 'restrain' (same word) the giving of Himself to their relief and restoration? It is up to Him. That is a good place for it to be, and there is no other.

Assignment Question 40

What can we learn about prayer from 63:7–64:12?

65:1-66:24 The end of chapter **64** saw the Lord's penitent people, praying amid the ruins, awaiting God's saving action. This final section makes it clear that is not where God is going to leave them. Throughout the book of Isaiah we have been aware of the two groups of the faithful and the perverse (see e.g. **1:27–28**, **8:11–20**). Here we see the final polarisation between the Lord's 'servants' (as in **54:17**) and those who determinedly persist in compromise and apostasy, and the final outcome for each: the new heavens and the new earth, with the new Jerusalem for all nations, and the final unending judgement for the perverse.

65:1 The question of the faithful in **64:12** was whether the Lord would continue to hold back His intervention in the face of their affliction. The Lord answers by alluding first not to their immediate relief but to His all-embracing world-wide purpose. This verse, if taken with verse **2** and what follows, may be mistaken as a reference to Israel. However, in Israel there had always been those who called on God's name or (literal Hebrew) were 'called by my name'. Our earliest commentator, Paul the apostle, made the distinction clear in Romans 10:20, 21. Thus this verse links with **66:18**, where the Lord is 'coming to gather all nations and tongues'. The initiative and action is entirely His, unlooked-for and unasked-for by any who end up asking and seeking and finding (compare John 15:16, Acts 17:26–27). Here God is coming in Person to give Himself to them. It is for this that the servants have been preserved and secured, and is the guarantee of their deliverance.

2–7 The false religious practices described here are those which were rife in Isaiah's own days, as in **1:10–20**, **29**. The people's way of life comes from their wrong thinking ('devices'), as they brazenly before God (compare Exodus 20:3) indulged in Canaanite religious practices, designed to put pressure on the deity rather than to submit in glad and holy obedience.

'gardens': human determination to make our own 'Edens', rather than be about taking God's holy Eden to the ends of the earth (Genesis 1:28, 2:8).

'bricks': humanly manufactured religion (contrast Exodus 20:25, Deuteronomy 27:5–6).

'tombs . . . secret places': communing with the dead for guidance, forbidden in Deuteronomy 18:9–14, 15–22, and lone meditational exercises.

THIS IS OUR GOD: STUDIES IN THE PROPHECY OF ISAIAH

65:7–66:2

‘swine’s flesh . . . abominable things’: see Leviticus 11:7, 7:18.

‘Keep to yourself . . . I am set apart from you’: exclusivism in religion, as in Mark 7:1–5; 1 Corinthians 1:10–13; 11:18–19.

It is to these, whose unholy and rebellious actions are offensive to God, that God has been holding out His hands in a gesture of prayer. But his forbearance will come to an end if their refusal to break with the sinful past is maintained, and there will be due and final retribution.

8–10 But for the faithful the judgment (see **63:3**) will be positive, as the Lord takes up a proverb or song of the vintage, to carefully harvest and cellar His choice wine. This relates to the ‘blessing’ promised for all nations to Abraham (Genesis 12:1–3, 7; 15:7), with ‘descendants’ (Genesis 3:15, 22:17, **53:10**), who will possess permanently (contrast **63:18**) the ‘mountains’ formerly used for false worship, now transformed, like a restored ‘Sharon’ (see **33:9, 35:2**) and like ‘Achor’ (a place of harm and trouble: see Joshua 7:24–26) with all troublesomeness removed.

11–12 Meanwhile, those who have taken their chances by trying to beguile the deities of luck and fate, and, instead of being personally responsive to the personal approach of the true God, offensively provoke His distaste, will meet a destiny they look not for.

13–16 Here, side by side, are the blessed rewards of the servants and the cursed punishments of the recalcitrant: The blessings depicted as in Genesis 22:18; **25:6; 55:1–2**; Revelation 2:17; 3:12; 14:1; and the curse in terms of pain and exclusion.

‘God of truth’: literally ‘God of Amen’ (compare 2 Corinthians 1:20), who is faithful in the keeping of all His promises, and has no place for sins and troubles that have now been dealt with and removed.

17–25 We come to the heart of this section, as the totally renewed creation that God is working towards is unveiled, in the place of all that has gone before (compare Revelation 21). This is what God has had in His mind and His heart since before He first created. God urges the people to join now in the joy that He will have in them then, with all causes of trouble and distress gone, and longevity such that a hundred-year-old person will be considered young. Familiar experiences of this life, such as building and planting, are used to describe what is indescribable in this life to come, and images of peace and security reminiscent of the Messianic world in **11:1–9** are used. Purposive fruitfulness, and intimate relational responsiveness with God, characterise this life. The only thing not changed from the old life is the curse on sin and its perpetrator the serpent, which remains in effect.

66:1–2 In the light of this, the faithful are urged to ‘be the more zealous to confirm your call and election’ (2 Peter 1:10). This begins with God affirming both His greatness and transcendence as Creator, that cannot be contained in anything that is made, and His coming to live among His people, in those who are lowly and repentant, and tremble with eagerness to carry out His word. This is not a denial of the earthly temple, but its fulfilment, in keeping with the consistent Biblical witness of 1 Kings 8:12–29, 2 Samuel 7:7, 1 Samuel 15:22, John 2:13–22, Acts 17:24–25, 1 Corinthians 3:16, Revelation 21:22.

THIS IS OUR GOD: STUDIES IN THE PROPHECY OF ISAIAH

66:3–24

- 3–4** The juxtaposition of lawful worship with sinful, meaningless, offensive or idolatrous practices (there are no words here for ‘like’) condemn the compromise by which things abominable were mixed in with the pre-exilic worship of God (see e.g. Ezekiel 8). Such ways arise from hearts set on such things as are detestable to God, but are again an evasion of direct personal responsive relationship with the holy God, and God will now bring upon them their worst fears.
- 5–6** The believers who have suffered from the worldly jibes of others (compare **28:9–10, 36:13–15**, Mark 13:9–13, John 16:2–3, 2 Peter 3:3–4) are reassured as the final recompense comes upon these enemies of God. Those who do not ‘tremble at his word’ will tremble at the coming of His judgment.
- 7–9** Assurance is given that the promised miraculous and painless birth (thus reversing the curse of the fall in Genesis 3:16), not only of a child, but of a whole land and nation (see **49:21, 53:10–11, 54:1**), will not be held back by any unwillingness or inability on God’s part, but that it will happen by His sole action (compare John 1:12–13). This is affirmed as ‘the LORD keeps saying’ and ‘the LORD has said’.
- 10–11** In the reality of this coming Jerusalem, those who love the present Jerusalem and mourn over her sins and sorry state, are to commit themselves fully to her in joyful participation in her present and anticipated benefits.
- 12–14** This is the ‘Jerusalem above’, who is ‘our mother’, of Galatians 4:25–27; Hebrews 11:10, 16; 12:22; Revelation 21. For Isaiah and his little band, living in this benighted little city in the eighth century B.C., this is an amazing vision.
- 15–17** The fire and sword of God’s holiness will bring to an end all abuse and perversion of true holiness and purity.
- 18–21** Having dealt with all such works and thoughts, the time has now come for the great gathering of God’s family (as in John 11:51–52). The Lord Himself comes and shows his glory (see John 1:14), sets a sign among them (see John 12:32–33), and sends out emissaries to the far reaches of the earth to ‘declare my glory among the nations’ (see the shorter ending of Mark 16, following verse 8). Thence will come in by any and every means, all obstacles notwithstanding, ‘your [Gentile] brethren’ from all nations, as a homely yet purified offering to God (see Romans 15:16), in which all may participate and minister.
- 22–23** This undertaking is as sure and eternal as the creation that God has ever purposed will be. And the worship (contrast **1:13**) will be constant, faithful and pure (see **58:13–14**).
- 24** Just as inevitable and on-going is the doom of those on whom the Lord’s wrath has come (see **59:18, 61:2, 63:3–4, 66:16**, compare Mark 9:43–48). Much as we may wish to set aside the doctrine of God’s wrath, as the serpent deceitfully did right at the beginning (Genesis 3:4), nevertheless, this final repelling verse in Isaiah’s prophecy conveys the constant reminder that the wages of sin is terrible death. And if the glorious promises and revelations in Isaiah do not work in us the necessary faith, hope and love, then perhaps this will.

Assignment Question 41

In chapters 65–66, trace the outcomes for (a) the faithful servants (b) the perverse rebels.