

THE ART OF 'NEW': **ISAIAH FOR TODAY**

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Theme	Text (chapters)	Topics
Condemnation, Consolation, Coronation		Introducing Isaiah
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The art of 'new'	65-66	New creation
Concepts of Isaiah		Theological concepts

The book of Isaiah opens with a depressing litany of sins committed by God's people. Chapter 1 is one of the most difficult biblical passages to digest. The strong language employed by God turns one's stomach and we cannot help but wonder how a chosen covenant people could degenerate to such a sad state of affairs. This is a chapter that most preachers avoid for it is nearly impossible to discover 'good news' from such abject failure.

Nevertheless, when we reach the apex of the book (chapters 65-66) we confront an altogether different reality—a new creation with God's people as central players in the new world. Again, we must wonder about the journey to get to this point. Clearly, the book moves from the misty lowlands of chapter 1 to the majestic peaks of chapters 65-66. This journey is crucial to any study of the book of Isaiah.

We begin this journey by exploring the development of thought in Isaiah so as to obtain a bird's eye view of the material. Along the way we shall stop at selected observation points to reflect on individual passages and what we may learn from them. I hope that we can do justice to a complicated work and find within its pages the messages still relevant to us today. I suggest that you read the selected passages before reading my thoughts on such verses. This will enhance your ability to see what I try to highlight for you. Throughout the discussion I have opted for a more literal reading of the text as it provides a clearer picture of parallelisms and other literary techniques used in the book.

CONDEMNATION, CONSOLATION, CORONATION!

Most scholars who study Isaiah fall into two main groups, those who posit multiple authorship theories and those who do not. Both interpretational approaches generally agree that the book is, arguably, the most complex biblical material. The disagreement invariably has to do with questions of authorship. Inevitably, multiple authorship theories result in a splintered view of the book, with the dissection of Isaiah into three parts, chapters 1-39, 40-55, and 56-66 respectively. A closer inspection of the two schools of interpretation also reveals that in an effort to distinguish themselves from each other, they unwittingly succeed in shadowing each other. Even those who accept Isaiah as author frequently see the book as partitioned into distinct segments along the same chapter designations. Further, both groups of interpreters recognise chapters 36-39 as a sort of interlude in the book.

In an earlier work, I had also adopted this general consensus and divided Isaiah into Initial Movement (1-35), Interlude (36-39), Crescendo Movement (40-55) and Finale Movement (56-66). However, the more closely I have studied Isaiah since, the more apparent it has become that this segmentation of the book is inadequate and a new approach is called for. What we need is an alternative way of looking at the book, especially for those who adopt canonical readings.

I decided to re-examine the book through the lens of certain statements Yahweh makes concerning his people (here identified simply as 'Israel'). Such statements betray Yahweh's true estimations of Israel and as such provide theological shifts to the book. Further, the placement of these statements at strategic points in the book also impacts its structural and thought patterns.

Perhaps a clue resides in three statements (in 1:4; 40:1; and 60:1) which together offer a unique view of the book as a whole. I contend that these three statements play a dominant role in both the theology and structure of the book. Chapters 36-39 are excluded from discussion due to their distinctive form and role in the book. These chapters are mostly narrative historical material and serve as a bridge or interlude between chapters 35 and 40. The dramatic leap of chapter 40 has been well documented as are the linkages between chapters 35 and 40. The historical narrative of chapters 36-39 provide breathing space between the oscillating pattern of Isaiah 1-35 and the constant crescendo of Isaiah 40 onwards.

I contend that the book of Isaiah portrays a three-shift arrangement significant to both its structural unity and theology. This view of the book may enable a better grasp of the riddle of Isaiah and offer greater insight for a renewed view of the book. Through this intentional refocus of structural elements, I hope to provide renewed interest for those who study Isaiah.

Condemnation: Yahweh's Repulsed Assessment

The name 'Israel' is utilised in this study for the nation of God even though historically the nation of Israel had split into two kingdoms, northern Israel and southern Judah, long before Isaiah appeared on the scene. The book also employs Zion, Judah and Jerusalem as parallel designations for this historical reality (e.g., 1:8; 5:3; etc.).

The first statement revealing Yahweh's estimation of Israel is located in 1:4, 'Ah, sinful nation!' In four quick phrases, Isaiah describes Israel's depravity and with the help of two couplets, this picture emerges

'a nation of sinning' // 'a people heavy with iniquity'
'seed of evildoers' // 'children who are corrupt'

Three reasons are supplied to explain this extremely negative assessment: (1) They have ‘forsaken’ or divorced Yahweh; (2) They ‘have despised’ or scorned the Holy One of Israel; and (3) They ‘have turned backwards’ (implying they had turned their backs on God). The language here is similar to other biblical passages which have to do with serving other gods, such as Deut 30:20; Jdgs 2:12; Jer 2:13; and Ezek 14:5. The three verbs imply intentionality on the part of Israel; theirs were not sins of omission or accident. Israel chose to turn away from Yahweh.

What follows in 1:2-15 is a scorching litany of Israel’s sins which culminates in Yahweh’s incredible remark that ‘when you lift up your hands in prayer, I will refuse to look at you; even if you offer countless prayers, I will not listen’ (vs 15). These are not merely judgement threats, they are expressions of utter disgust and divine repulsion at the sins of God’s people. Divine repugnance is put out in plain sight for every reader to see. Yahweh asks, ‘What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices?’ (vs 11) and ‘who requires this of you?’ (vs 12). He instructs them to ‘stop bringing useless offerings’ (lit. ‘offerings of emptiness’; vs 13) and informs them that he ‘despises’ their acts of religiosity (vs 13-14) which are an ‘abomination’ to him. There are other practices that God considers ‘abominations’: homosexuality (Lev 18:22-30; 20:13), idolatry (Deut 7:25; 13:15), human sacrifice (Deut 12:31), eating ritually unclean animals (Deut 14:3-8), sacrificing defective animals (Deut 18:9-14) and practising ritual prostitution (1 Kgs 14:23).

Going a step further, Yahweh says, ‘I cannot stand iniquity with a festival’ (vs 13b). Literally, the verse reads, ‘I cannot [endure] iniquity and assembly’. The two nouns are probably a pairing with a single meaning. The difficulty of translating can be observed in the various renderings of this sentence, as the following sampling demonstrates. ‘I cannot endure iniquity and solemn assembly’ (ESV). ‘I cannot endure iniquity and the sacred meeting’ (NKJV). ‘I cannot stand iniquity with a festival’ (HCSB). ‘I cannot bear your evil assemblies’ (NIV). ‘I cannot tolerate sin-stained celebrations’ (The NET Bible). ‘Assemblies with iniquity, I cannot abide’ (JPS).

The litany of sins makes for morbid reading: depravity and abandoning Yahweh (vs 14), total and unimpeded sinfulness (vs 15-16), resulting devastation of the land (vs 7-9) and mindless religiosity mixed with a life of iniquity (vs 11-14). Such is the depth to which Israel had sunk that Yahweh likened them to Sodom and Gomorrah (vs 9-10; see Gen 19). The poignancy of Yahweh’s anguish is expressed most painfully in the Song of the Vineyard, ‘What more could I have done for My vineyard than I did? Why, when I expected a yield of good grapes, did it yield worthless grapes?’ (Isa 5:4) Israel’s power brokers and populace are referred to by the unflattering appellations of Sodom and Gomorrah and in doing this, the prophet hints at the unlikelihood of their ever heeding the command of God and the potential for divine retribution. Sin is a *cul de sac* that leads to absolute divine retribution from which no one can escape and no human device or effort can prevent such a calamity.

This preponderance of condemnation extends to other nations as well. In chapters 13-23 we encounter the ‘Oracles’ against the nations which involve Israel and many of the surrounding countries. The Hebrew *massa*’ (oracle or utterance) is used 11 times in these chapters (in 13:1; 14:28; 15:1; 17:1; 19:1; 21:1,11,13; 22:1,25; 23:1) but only 3 times elsewhere in the book (in 30:6; 46:1,2). Isaiah 13-23 comprise a string of judgement messages, mostly directed at the nations of the world, though not exclusively so.

There are fifteen separate judgement statements which are arranged in two groups (9 oracles + 6 oracles) separated by a narrative interlude pertaining to Isaiah being a sign from God. Ten of the fifteen judgements utilise the word *massa*’ which is normally translated as ‘oracle’ with the specific connotation of ‘oracle of judgement’ in this segment. Three of the oracles do not employ *massa*’,

while two of them are introduced by *hoy*, a particle which expresses surprise or danger and therefore rendered as 'Woe!' or 'Ah!'

Chapters 24-27 are often referred to as the Isaiah Apocalypse and depict Yahweh's eschatological judgement. Isaiah 28-33 comprise 'Woe' statements against the nation and others who have been closely associated with Israel. The Hebrew *hoy* ('Woe') is employed 22 times in Isaiah but mostly in chapters 1-35 (in 1:4,24; 5:8,11,18,20,21,22; 10:1,5; 16:4; 17:12; 18:1; 28:1; 29:1,15; 30:1; 31:1; 33:1), while it is used only 3 times elsewhere (in 45:9,10; 55:1). The section is riddled by more talk of judgement characterised by the pronouncement of 'Woe!' against an assortment of entities. The single appearance of 'oracle' in 30:6 suggests that these prophecies run along the same lines as the oracles of Isaiah 13-23.

Isaiah 1-35 is peppered with statements of judgement and this is the dominant motif of these chapters. Yahweh's judgements are not focused only at the corporate level but are also applied to individual leaders as signal for systemic failures. The indictment against King Ahaz, well-known for his ungodly ways, is an example of such individual action (Isa 7:10-25). However, almost unnoticed in the book are Yahweh's indictments against two of Israel's second-most powerful leaders, Shebna (Isa 22:15-19; cf. 2 Kgs 18:18,26) and Eliakim (Isa 22:20-25; see Neh 12:41; 2 Kgs 23:34; Mt 1:13 for others with the same name). They held the position of *soken*, a Hebrew term indicating they were second-in-command in the kingdom.

The word *soken* also appears in feminine form for 'maidservant' or 'nurse' (1 Kgs 1:2, 4). Inscriptions in several languages support the masculine reading and show the term refers to someone who represents the king. The title 'who is over the household' indicates a high-ranking government official. It was first used in the list of Solomon's officials (1 Kgs 4:6) and is also mentioned in 1 Kgs 16:9; 18:3; and 2 Kgs 15:5. By the time of Hezekiah, the person with this title appears to be in the same position that Joseph had in Egypt (Gen 40-44; 45:8). In 2 Kgs 15:5, Jotham, while serving as co-regent with his father, was accorded this title. Later in Isa 36:3, Eliakim would bear this title and at that point in Isaiah, Shebna was the virtual second in command in the court of Judah.

Tragically, both leaders are judged as failures by Yahweh; Shebna for his wanton materialism (Isa 22:16) and Eliakim for his pride. No reason is spelled out for Eliakim's fall but three reasons are possible: the glory and burden of government became too heavy, someone destroyed him or success got to his head and exposed him to divine judgement. The last one is a likely suspect in this particular setting.

When Yahweh uttered, 'Ah, sinful nation', he was venting his exasperation over the inability of his people to live in a manner becoming of a special covenant people. However, this is not the only picture emerging from chapters 1-35. This segment exhibits a pendulum movement where condemnation is balanced with hope. As early as 1:16 onwards we read of Yahweh's true salvific desire. The nation that is so satiated with sin is still his (see 5:7) and he is not about to give her up. He calls upon Israel to enter into discussion with him (1:18), proposes a possible paradigm shift (1:16-17) and promises restoration (1:26). This offer of redemptive possibilities is also spelled out in visions of Zion's future glorification (4:2-6), in messianic intimations of a Prince of Peace (9:1-7) and a David-like redeemer King (11:1-9) and in songs of the redeemed (12:1-6; 26:1-21; 35:1-10).

The entire segment oscillates between these two realities: judgement and hope. This movement is symptomatic of and also provides structural pattern for the segment. The portrayal of an abandoned and adulteress Zion (1:8, 21) receives an entire facelift in the joy of the redeemed returning to Zion (35:10). Isaiah 1-35 climaxes with a new Zion, a new home for those Yahweh redeems. Chapters so filled with condemnation also hold out possibilities for something better.

Consolation: Yahweh's Heartfelt Response

As soon as we enter Isaiah 40, we notice a dramatic change in Yahweh's mood. The negativity and threats of chapters 1-35 fade almost entirely into the background. Instead a new optimism is depicted with Yahweh expressing renewed interest in Israel. Isaiah 40 begins with wonderful words of consolation, 'Comfort, comfort my people' (vs 1). Evidently, a divine shift occurs in this verse. This is Yahweh's second estimation of his people and one which governs the interest and structure of the second segment.

Isaiah's so-called second segment, chapters 40-55, has received wide acceptance among scholars of varying persuasions. However, I think it best to view Isaiah's second segment as extending until the end of chapter 59. There are four pieces of evidence which draw chapters 40-59 into a single reality, providing it with theological and structural unity.

The first pertains to the changing attitude of Yahweh. Not only does Yahweh speak with more tender tones (Isa 40:2 says that God will 'speak to the *heart* of Jerusalem'), he also chooses to underline the special relationship between himself and Israel. There is a constant use of the name 'Holy One of Israel' (11 times in chapters 40-59), which clearly evokes covenantal concerns (see Isa 41:14, 16, 20; 43:3, 14, 15; etc.). The name is used some 26 times in the book of Isaiah, but elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible only in 2 Kgs 19:22; Pss 71:22; 78:41; 89:19; Jer 50:29; 51:5. This focus on covenant is also expressed in such statements as: 'Israel, my servant, Jacob, whom I have chosen' (41:8); 'I have called you by your name, you are Mine' (43:1); and 'Because you are precious in My sight, and honoured, and I love you. Do not fear, for I am with you' (43:4-5). Furthermore, Yahweh paints a softer image of himself as comforter (40:1-2; 51:12), as a non-forgetful parent (49:14-16) and as someone who dwells among his people (57:15). Yahweh's covenantal love extends to everyone who will come to him (55:1) and this includes people (foreigners and eunuchs) who had previously been excluded from covenant (56:1-7; see Deut 23:2-9). This is quantum leap paradigm shift in Yahweh's estimation of Israel.

The second feature is the use of a syntactical element quite distinctive to chapters 40-59, the double imperative from the same root verb with no intervening qualifiers (this occurs in 40:1; 51:9, 17; 52:1, 11; and 57:14). This feature is found only once elsewhere in Isaiah, in 62:10 where a double double imperative is used (the double double imperative in Isa 62:10 appears to be a deliberate structural feature). The Hebrew words employed in this manner are 'comfort' (40:1), 'wake up' (52:11), 'leave' (51:9, 17; 52:1) and 'build up' (57:14). While it is customary to treat Isaiah 40-55 as a segment, it is evident that this distinctive syntactical feature extends the segment to chapter 59.

The third major feature of this segment concerns the presence of the Servant Poems (42:1-9; 49:1-7; 50:4-11; 52:13-53:12). The label 'Servant Poems' (the song terms used by Isaiah, *zamar*, *shir* and *ranan* do not appear in the Servant Poems) is preferred here to differentiate them from the other songs in Isaiah. The messianic nature of these Poems is widely acclaimed and discussed. Suffice to say that in this context, it is the role of these Poems that are pertinent. In Isaiah 1-35, Eliakim is the only person Yahweh refers to as 'my servant' (22:20). However, he is a tragic figure who, despite being described in almost messianic terms, fails miserably (22:25). When we compare Isa 22:20-25 with Rev 1:9-20, we discover certain descriptions about Eliakim are applied to Jesus: 'robe', 'sash', 'authority' and 'glory'. The reference to the 'key of David' and the authority to open or close with no one able to reverse such action is applied to Eliakim in Isa 22:22 and to Jesus in Rev 3:7. In Isaiah 40-59, 'My Servant' becomes a messianic designation of the true Servant who will not fail Yahweh. While there are messianic titles in every segment of Isaiah, 'Servant' is unique to these chapters and this Servant is a Messianic figure designated to fulfil all the failures of other human servants. Moreover, the incorporation of outcasts (foreigners and eunuchs) in the covenant fulfils the

servanthood expectation of covenant (see Exod 19:4-6) as these new covenant persons become 'servants' of Yahweh (56:6). In this context, the work of the Servant is to create new 'servants' for God.

A fourth feature of Yahweh's new response brings into focus a new covenant reality. While the phrase 'new covenant' is not employed, it is quite evident that Isaiah 40-59 culminate in new covenantal realities. The Hebrew word for 'covenant' is used 12 times in Isaiah (in 24:5; 28:15, 18; 33:8; 42:6; 49:8; 54:10; 55:3; 56:4,6; 59:21; 61:8.) with 7 of these in chapters 40-59. In the book, Yahweh speaks of 'My covenant' 3 times (in 56:4, 6 and 59:21). In chapter 56, Yahweh states in unequivocal terms that outcasts can now become members of his covenant. There is something radically new about this shift of divine attitude towards those who had been previously excluded from covenant. Of greater import is the description at the end of chapter 59 where the Redeemer comes to Zion with these pronouncements: 'As for Me, this is My covenant with them (This expression is found again only in Ezek 16:8; 37:26). My Spirit who is on you (see Isa 42:1; 61:1), and My words that I have put in your mouth (see Isa 51:16; Deut 18:18), will not depart from your mouth, or from the mouth of your children, or from the mouth of your children's children, from now on and forever' (59:21; see 54:10). There is also a resemblance here to the new covenant of Jer 31:31-34. God's new covenant, recorded in Isaiah 56-59, cannot be abrogated or undermined; it will stand the test of time.

Isaiah 40-59 culminate in the promise of new covenant realities that may be shared by everyone who comes to Yahweh irrespective of background. The entire segment is predicated on new realities which Yahweh performs through his Servant via a new covenant.

Coronation: Yahweh's Ultimate Stance

The final segment of Isaiah commences with the amazing pronouncement, 'Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of Yahweh shines over you' (60:1). This statement presents the ultimate transformation of Israel from the unwanted daughter in chapter 1 to the elevated princess in chapter 60. At first, Yahweh had assessed Israel as 'sinful' but then changes his mind to something more comforting. However, he does not stop there as his evaluation of Israel shifts one more time to make her the abode of his glory. This statement speaks of reversed fortunes, the destiny of Israel, and everything in the book crescendos towards the final reversal, new heaven and new earth.

Syntactical considerations reveal that double imperatives are utilised in Isaiah 60-66, but differently from chapters 40-59. 'Arise, shine' (60:1; LXX reads 'Shine, shine' which may be an attempt to duplicate the style of Isa 51:9, 17; 52:1) are both imperatival forms but come from different root words. This use of double imperative is different from chapters 40-59 and is the only instance where it is used in Isaiah. Isa 62:10 also uses double imperatives with the same root word but the pattern (2+1; 2+1) is different from other passages; it reads 'go out, go out . . . prepare . . . build up, build up . . . clear away . . .' These patterns are unique to these chapters.

Another major shift in this final segment of the book has to do with the 'servant' motif. In Isaiah 22 a failed 'servant' is introduced, while in the Servant Poems the messianic Servant is revealed. In Isa 65:8-16 a new portrait of 'servant' emerges. First, the portrait is plural in contrast to the singular portraits of earlier passages. In this passage alone, 'servants' is employed 7 times and is paralleled with 'chosen ones' twice (65:9, 15). Second, Yahweh speaks of these servants in possessive mode, each time referring to them as 'My servants' (65:8, 9, 13, 14, 15). Third, these 'servants' are recipients of divine aid, providence and protection (Isa 65:8-12). They experience great reversals in their lives vis-à-vis their enemies: they eat, drink, rejoice and shout with joy while the reverse is true for their detractors (65:13-16); the contrast is stark and final. Involved in all this is the

transformation of rebels into 'servants'. The book shifts from failed servants to a messianic Servant to servants of Yahweh.

This elevation of Yahweh's people is predicated upon the messianic mission of Isaiah 61. Yahweh's anointed appears to reverse all the conditions resulting from sin: broken hearts are healed, liberty is provided, mourners are comforted and despair is displaced (61:1-3). Moreover, ancient ruins are rebuilt (61:4) and a new eternal covenant is ushered in (61:8). Yahweh also tells them that they and their posterity 'will be known among the nations' and everyone will recognise them as a people 'blessed by Yahweh' (61:9). God himself is the guarantor of the promises (see 41:13; 42:6-8; 43:3, 15; 44:6, 24-28; 46:8-11; 48:17; 49:26; 51:12-16; 60:16). With all of this transformation, Zion is no longer the abandoned daughter (1:8); she is now 'Daughter Zion' of Yahweh (62:11).

The final piece of this incredible shift is Yahweh's proclamation that he 'will create a new heaven and a new earth' (65:17). Some have challenged the premise that new heaven and earth here really refers to God's new creation and instead argue for a non-eschatological fulfilment. However, such is not the case as 'new heavens and new earth' refers to the new creation of God. The whole concept is part of the shift associated with Isaiah's third segment. Whatever damage sin had caused is now corrected as Yahweh makes everything new. The intention of this new creation is the eternal survival of Israel, for Yahweh states, 'For just as the new heavens and the new earth, which I will make, will endure before me . . . so will your offspring and your name endure' (66:22). As a new day dawns, Israel has journeyed from the brink of extinction to the heights of glory.

These significant conceptual and structural strands bind the book of Isaiah together while also uncovering its various segments, chapters 1-35, 40-59 and 60-66 (with chapter 36-39 viewed as a historical interlude). Each segment presents a distinct estimation of Yahweh concerning Israel. Each segment begins with an unforgettable expression and incorporates distinctive syntactical and literary features. God's assessment of Israel ranges from condemnation to consolation to eventual coronation. The harsh 'Ah, sinful nation' is replaced by the poignant 'Comfort, comfort my people' and this in turn gives way to the triumphant 'Arise, shine for your light has come'.

At the end of each segment there is something new that is unveiled: a new joyful Zion in chapter 35, new covenant realities in chapters 56-59 and new 'heaven and earth' in chapters 65-66. Yahweh's exasperation with Israel is replaced by a desire to lift up his people and then the ultimate elevation of re-creation.

OF OXEN AND DONKEYS

Isaiah 1

This chapter outlines God's repugnance at the sins of his people and, with the help of covenant lawsuit language, God takes them to task for this.

God calls upon nature itself (1:2), 'heaven and earth', to serve as witness in the case he is presenting (see also Deut 30:19 and 32:1). God's charge opens with a painful monologue about his parenting experience: 'I have raised children and brought them up, but they have rebelled against me'. The dual act of birthing and nurturing is dramatically thrown in reverse gear by the unexpected response of these children. The Hebrew word 'rebel' connotes wilful defiance against the will and authority of a ruler or father (see 1 Kgs 12:19; 2 Kgs 1:1).

The disgust of God with his people is amplified in absorbingly unflattering descriptions (1:3). The behaviour of the people is deemed less cognitive than that of simple farm animals. The ox and the donkey know whose they are, but Israel does not know God. Rebellion is compounded by ignorance. The personifications of heaven, earth, ox and donkey simply augment the frustration of God at the outset of the case. The reversion to Israel is probably intended to conjure up images about the covenant, perhaps indicating that Israel's conduct jeopardised the covenant.

In Isa 1:4-10, God's voice is replaced with that of the prophet who is far more scathing in his critique of the nation. In four quick phrases, Isaiah describes the depravity of Judah. He calls them a 'nation of sinning', 'a people heavy with iniquity', 'seed of evildoers' and 'children who are corrupt' (1:4). Their sin can be explained by three things: they have forsaken or divorced Yahweh; they have despised or scorned the Holy One of Israel; and, they have turned backwards (they had turned their backs on God). All three verbs imply intentionality on the part of Judah; theirs were not sins of omission or accident. Such was the depth of Judah's plight—unknowing and unrecognised.

The rhetorical question that follows is a poignant lamentation (1:5): Why submit to so much pain? Why continue on this destructive path? The misery of the path is clearly spelled out—the whole head is sick, and the whole heart faint. The subsequent descriptions depict Judah's awful state in term of wounds that are untended and have festered throughout the body. 'From the sole of the foot even to the head, no spot is uninjured—wounds, welts, and festering sores not cleaned, bandaged, or soothed with oil' (1:6-7). The horrible picture of untreated wounds is further amplified by the utter devastation of the land, which lay desolate, with its cities burned, and foreigners running amok over its fields. The country has been devastated by war (a probable reference to Assyrian invasions) and the land is as sick and bruised as the people.

God is not yet done with his denunciations (1:14-15). With regards to their religious rites (new moons and appointed feasts), God states, 'my soul *hates* [them]; they *have become* a burden to me; and I *am weary* of carrying [them]'. The climax of divine disgust is depicted in vs 15: 'When you spread your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen'. God is saying that he will neither look upon (assumably with favour; God's favourable look is observed in Num 6:25-26 and Ps 4:6[7]), nor listen (pay attention) to their many acts of worship. Here is the punch line: 'Your hands are covered with blood'. This may point to the fact they offered far too many empty sacrifices, but more likely, refers to the blood of their many victims (1:21).

Having exposed the emptiness and ruthlessness of their religious experience, God then sets about attempting to turn the nation around so as to avoid a spiritual precipice. Isa 1:16-23 may be divided into three units: the command for change (1:16-17), an invitation for dialogue leading to change (1:18-20) and reminders of the price for resisting change (1:21-23).

God urges the people to terminate the negative actions that have stained their relationship with him (vs 16). 'Wash up; clean yourselves; remove the *evil* of your doings from before my eyes; stop doing *evil*'. The first two verbs have a strong ritualistic sense to them, while the remaining two connote social actions. However, it is insufficient to simply terminate negative actions. Positive remedial action must follow. This is encapsulated in the following statement (vs 17): 'Learn to do good; seek justice; bless the oppressor; judge the orphan; plead for the widow'.

'Doing good' and 'seeking justice' are fairly self-explanatory, generic concepts of goodness. 'Judging the orphan' and 'pleading for the widow' refer to the work that must be done on behalf of those who cannot help themselves, the victims of society. The central clause is problematic as its meaning is less certain. The clause may read either as 'correct oppression' and 'aid the oppressed' (ESV, The NET Bible, NIV, JPS) or as 'reprove/correct oppressor' (NKJV, HCSB). Perhaps it is best to retain the more natural meaning of the verb with the reading suggested here.

God continues speaking, but the tone changes to one of invitation and entreaty. God invites Judah to a legal rapprochement with himself (1:18). The stated possibilities are packed with promise. A nation stained with blood (see 1:15) may experience the absolute cleansing that can turn red to white. However, there are conditions to transformation (1:19-20). The first condition is 'willingness to obey', an attitude that will enable the people to enjoy (lit. 'to eat') the riches of the land. The second condition states refusal and rebellion would mean they will be devoured (lit. 'to be eaten') by the sword. The word play provides the people with two options, 'to eat' or 'to be eaten'.

The remaining verses remind Judah of the price that would be paid should they choose to ignore the invitation God has put before them.

Isaiah 1:1-31 has taken its readers through an odyssey into the will of God. Two concepts stand out in this journey. First, is the sense of abhorrence that God feels toward sin. So overwhelming is this sense that God will not tolerate sin even, and especially, among his people. If God's people choose the path of sin, there is nothing but divine judgement at the end of the road. Sin is a *cul de sac* that leads to absolute divine retribution from which no one can escape and no human device or effort can prevent such a calamity. Second, this awesome God, who holds his people accountable for their conduct, also presents himself as ready to redeem. He has the power to change the course of people's lives and enable them to find a way out of any *cul de sac*. To resist his will and run contrary to his plan is disastrous. However, to turn to him is life and redemption.

The fate of Judah (and Israel) may seem like millennia behind us and it is very easy to convince ourselves that we have learned from history. Nevertheless, it falls upon God's people today to practise the lessons of history. We must become intentional in our obedience to God. We cannot rest on our laurels of religious truth and practice. Israel's primary downfall was empty religiosity which exhibited itself in social disease. The possibility of this becoming contemporary reality is just as real now as then. We must not allow ourselves to be sucked into the vacuum of meaningless rituals or ignore the needs of those around us who are less fortunate than ourselves. The price for failure is frightening because empty religiosity and callous social consciousness are recipes for divine displeasure. To avoid the *cul de sac*, God's people today must be conscious of this twin danger. We must remain alert and seek the God whose power ensures a successful journey.

NO MORE WILD GRAPES!

Isaiah 5

Isaiah 5:1-7 is one of the more recognised passages in the book, acknowledged by many as the Song of the Vineyard. The 'song' is a poignant reminder of the failure of the covenant, the failure of love. The Song kneads together the love of God (expressed in very intimate terms) with his righteous indignation (voiced in frightening words).

The Song of the Vineyard is without doubt one of the more artistic poems in the book. It comprises 4 short stanzas: 5:1-2 sets the scene for the song; 5:3-4 unveils the voice of God as he seeks a verdict against his people; 5:5-6 recounts the decision that God makes; and 5:7 identifies the vineyard and its failure.

A close reading of the song reveals that Stanzas 1 and 4 are most likely the voice of the prophet, while Stanzas 2 and 3 are evidently the voice of Yahweh. The Song opens with the words, 'Let me sing for my Beloved/Friend a song of love' (5:1). The word *shir* (one of Isaiah's song terms) provides ambience for the song. The singer, who is unidentified but may be the prophet, is committed to sing this love song ('a song of my beloved'). The song concerns a vineyard that belongs to his Friend, who is probably Yahweh. The assonances in the verse paint a beautiful picture of the vineyard's fertility. His Friend 'has a vineyard on a very fertile hill'.

Three actions of the Friend, who owns the vineyard, are described (5:2): (1) he prepares the soil; (2) he prepares for the harvest; and (3) he waits for the harvest only to reap unexpected results. With the help of a quick succession of verbs, the preparation of the soil is depicted as being thorough. Further, in making ready for harvest, he builds a watchtower and hews out a wine press. The imagery is twofold for the 'watchtower' goes up, while the 'wine vat' goes down, hinting at the completeness of his readiness. The third act of the verse presents a cruel twist because, despite all the efforts expended by the vineyard owner, the results are catastrophic. Anticipating the vineyard would produce 'edible grapes', the landlord instead reaps a harvest of 'inedible/sour grapes'.

In 5:3, the speaker changes and it is probably the voice of Yahweh we hear. Using covenant lawsuit language, he calls upon the residents of Jerusalem and Judah to serve as jurors in his case against his vineyard. He pleads, 'You decide between me and my vineyard'. The word 'decide' means 'to judge' as in render a legal verdict. God voices his exasperation over this state of affairs (5:4). His rhetorical question, 'What more could I have done for My vineyard than I did?', shows that God had done all that was possible but to no avail. Nevertheless, God does not abandon his vineyard but becomes involved in its destruction (5:5). He spells out his decision in no uncertain terms: 'I will remove its hedge, and it shall be devoured; I will break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down'. The word picture either depicts the devastating results of war or simply the effects of an unprotected vineyard becoming grazing ground for animals. The anger of God intensifies as he turns a once lush garden into a wasteland, unplowed and covered with unwanted vegetation, briars and thorns (5:6). The use of 'briars' and 'thorns' is unique to Isaiah (see 7:23-25; 9:18; 10:17; 27:4; 32:13). God even commands the clouds to refrain from pouring rain on the vineyard, completing its devastation.

Reverting to the prophet's voice in 5:7, we come face to face with both the identification of the vineyard, and its owner, and the rationale for its demise. The first two lines leave no doubt as to what the vineyard is. 'For the vineyard of Yahweh Tseba'ot is the house of Israel and the people of Judah are the planting of his pleasure'. The vineyard meets a horrific end because of its failure to live up to the owner's expectations. The pathos of this tragedy is encapsulated in masterful wordplays Isaiah employs at the apex of the Song. 'And he looked for justice (*mishpat* in Hebrew), but instead, bloodshed (*mispakh* in Hebrew); for righteousness (*tsdaqah* in Hebrew), but instead, an outcry

(*ts'aqah* in Hebrew)! It is quite likely the two lines address the objective (justice) and subjective (righteousness) aspects of God's expectation and Israel's failure.

It is difficult to fathom the depth of God's love for his people. The Song of the Vineyard expresses this love in sublime language. On the one hand, it depicts the length to which God would go to nurture love. On the other hand, it portrays the depth to which an unreturned love could sink. The surprise for us is that even God's love has limits; there are boundaries that cannot be breached. When God's people prove recalcitrant, he has no choice but to abandon them to worst-case scenarios. However, even in the midst of judgement we can hear the ache of God's heart as he executes his tough-love policy.

One of the most appealing concepts of contemporary Christianity is the idea that God is our friend; that he is our 'buddy'. Similarly, there is a much-recited slogan that says, 'God is good all the time; all the time God is good'. The danger with these ideas is that they ignore the fact that God not only loves us, he also holds us accountable. God's love is both redemptive and retributive. In the warm, fuzzy climate of today's church, it is highly desirable to believe that God has now become 'civilised' and his love for us always supersedes his sense of right and wrong. There is much risk in such a mind-set. Subscribing to this type of thinking, places God's people on a truly precarious footing. Love, especially God's love, cannot be taken for granted because the more we receive, the more we ought to return.

This passage reveals that the sin which upsets God the most is relational in nature because it leads to pride and warped relationships. God will not tolerate social injustice and spiritual insensibility. Nearly three thousand years stand between God's people today and Isaiah's time. We ought to wonder whether there has been any change of mind-set and lifestyle. Have the relational issues that lead to pride and injustice been removed from God's people? Are we really that much different? Have we learned from history? Pride, social injustice, discrimination and spiritual insensibility still prevail among the so-called people of God. The difference between us and Isaiah's time is that we do not have a live prophetic voice to warn us and therein lies a perilous dilemma. Furthermore, the tendency of contemporary Christian preaching to deliver a diet of 'feel-good' sermons immunises us from the need to confront our collective malaise. If we are not fully attuned to the demanding messages of Scripture and demonstrate the willingness to heed the chastening of the Word, we may find ourselves in spiritual peril equal to what we read in the Song of the Vineyard.

NEAR FATAL ENCOUNTER

Isaiah 6

Isaiah 6 serves two principal purposes. On the one hand, it recounts Isaiah's call to ministry. On the other hand, it provides a fulcrum to connect the generalities of chapters 1-5 with the specificity of chapters 7-12. It also reveals how the oscillation between gloom and hope reaches a fitting climax.

The call of God came to Isaiah 'in the year that King Uzziah died' (6:1). This would mean that his ministry began around 740 BC. During the long reign of Uzziah, Judah had experienced an unprecedented period of growth and reached the zenith of its existence as a nation. Uzziah had contracted leprosy for flouting the cultic rituals (2 Chron 26:16-21) and spent much of his reign in co-regency with his son Jotham. The passing away of a great king leaves Isaiah with a sense of trepidation and the vision carries with it no small amount of comfort by introducing him to the ultimate king. Isaiah sees 'the Lord' ('adonai' is used, not Yahweh; also in vs 8 and 11) on a throne that is 'highly elevated'. Isaiah's concept of the elevation of God is also depicted in 2:10-22; 37:16; 40:12-26; 57:15. Despite the apparent transcendence, God's robe fills the temple in Jerusalem.

Around the throne of God are seraphs, heavenly beings (6:2). The word *sarap* (lit. 'burning one') here is the only OT reference to heavenly beings. The angelic possibility is enhanced by similar descriptions in Ezek 1-3 and Rev 4, despite differences in details. The Seraphs have three pairs of wings each. The use of the wings is also spelled out: two for covering their face (this will become clear in vs 3), two for covering their feet (either a euphemism for private parts or an expression of reverence), and two for flight. The verbs describe what the Seraphs' do and indicate customary or habitual action. These Seraphs call to one another, 'Holy, holy, holy, [is] Yahweh Tseba'ot; the fulness of the whole earth [is] his glory' (6:3). The threefold utterance of 'holy' is Hebrew idiom for the super-superlative and probably should read 'most holiest' (see also Ezek 21:27[32]). The Seraphs acknowledge the awesome transcendence of the God from whom they hide their faces. This reality is foundational to Isaiah's coinage of the name 'Holy One of Israel'. The only other occurrence of this proclamation is in Rev 4:8. The second part of the proclamation is regularly translated as 'the whole earth is full of his glory', but the construction reads 'fulness of the earth' as in the earth itself is God's glory. The impact of the Seraphs' calling could be felt on earth (6:4). The foundations of the doorways tremble and the temple is filled with smoke (compare the dedication of the Sanctuary in Exod 40:34-35 and Temple in 2 Chron 7:1-3).

After seeing God, Isaiah sees himself and it was an unpleasant sight (6:5). He pronounces himself essentially lost, 'Woe to me! I am lost!' The expression creates a profound sense of inadequacy in the presence of holy God. His reason for sensing this is threefold: 'I am a man of unclean lips, I live among a people with unclean lips, for my eyes have seen the King, Yahweh Tseba'ot'. In Scripture, Isaiah is not the only person to feel this way when confronted by God's holy presence (see Gen 32:30; Exod 33:20). A subtle contrast with the Seraphs' experience is drawn out—the Seraphs' use their lips to praise God but hide their eyes from him, while Isaiah's lips are too impure for praise and his eye have been exposed.

Next, Isaiah sees one of the Seraphs fly to him with live coal taken from the altar in his hands (5:6). The picture of a 'burning one' carrying a 'burning thing' would strike fear in the hearts of most people, but such is not the case. The Seraph touches Isaiah's mouth (lips) with the coal and pronounces him clean. 'Behold this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for' (5:7). The totality of God's operative grace is seen in three acts: touched, taken away and atoned for.

Isaiah has seen God and the Seraphs; next he hears God (5:8), 'Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?' The plural pronoun 'us' is used in a similar way as in Gen 1:26, either as a plural of majesty (God speaking of himself in plural) or a plural of consultation (an address to and inclusive of the heavenly beings). Isaiah's response is unequivocal: 'Here I am! Send me'. The prophet who had seen the King and himself stands ready to do the bidding of the King.

The rest of the chapter spells out the mission of Isaiah (6:9-11). Even though the immediate audience is the nation of Judah, Isaiah sees the world at large as well. The first part of the message is laced with heavy irony and wordplay. Literally it reads, 'Hear and hear, but do not understand; see and see, but do not perceive'. The Hebrew idiom conveys the idea of continued but futile action ('keep listening . . . keep looking'). The irony is to prepare Isaiah for the spiritual insensibility that he will encounter. The irony of the message continues when God says, 'Make the heart of this people dull (lit. 'make fat'), their ears heavy and their eyes shut' in case 'they see with their eyes and with their ears hear; and with their hearts understand'. These three verbs, which stress ongoing action, are followed by two other actions, turn and heal, which stress completed action. The interplay conveys the idea that such action is neither desirable nor forthcoming.

In 6:11, Isaiah interrupts God with a troubling question, 'Lord, how long?' He wants to know whether the message of vs 10 is to be carried out indefinitely in light of the fact that there will be no response. God answers, 'Until cities lie in ruins, without inhabitants, houses are without people, the land is ruined and desolate'. The language here conjures up images of war and echoes an earlier description of the same in 5:5, 9. The exile motif introduced in 5:13 is mentioned again (6:12) and it is Yahweh who drives his people into exile. The only verb in the verse ensures there can be no mistaking this particular act of God. The last verse revisits the one-tenth rule of 5:10 to refer to the destructiveness of the exile. However, there is a ray of hope at the end of the verse. 'Like the terebinth or the oak, which leaves a stump when felled, the holy seed is the stump'. The tree, the nation, may be cut down, but the stump, a righteous remnant, will remain.

The call of Isaiah provides three principal theological concepts. First, we need to encounter God in order to do his bidding. Only when we have seen the Lord can we be equipped to do his work. Second, God's grace is the empowerment that makes our obedience possible. Salvation is an act of divine grace and it enables sinful humans to live in propinquity with holy God. Third, mission is the most natural response to salvation. God redeems his people for mission and salvation without mission is an empty experience.

The Christian world today is deeply enamoured with the so-called success theology (prosperity gospel) trumpeted by the mega Churches of the world. The idea that God's blessings are the expected result of faith is both powerful and seductive. Lost in this mix is any sense of accountability we might bear towards God. To subscribe to such a theology is to delude ourselves into thinking that God owes us, while ignoring that we owe him our hearts and lives. God does and will hold his people accountable for what they do but divine judgement is never total, it is merely a precursor to greater blessings. Success theology may have a point to make but not one on which our faith may safely rest. Only a personal relationship with the Lord will suffice.

STRAIGHT AHEAD

Isaiah 9:1-7; 11

Isaiah 9:1-7 is one of the best-known passages in the book. It offers a glimmer of hope in the promise of a coming deliverer, a messianic figure with an eternal light to dispel the gloom of the preceding unit. The unit begins with a historical note concerning darkness (vs 1). This is followed by an intriguing construction comprising ‘the people’–‘you’–‘they’ in vs 2-3. The final part, vs 4-7, contains a sequence of three thought lines beginning with ‘for’.

The preface concerning gloom leads to statements about ‘former time’ and ‘latter time’ (9:1). The target area, Galilee, has experienced the worst but now is to know the best. The contrast is captured in the phrases ‘to make light’ and ‘to make heavy’. The contrasting fortune endured by the land is reflected in a similar turn around in the human world (9:2-3). ‘The people who walk in darkness have seen a great light’. This happens because God has ‘multiplied the nations’ and ‘made great the joy’. As a consequence, the people are able to rejoice. It is God who causes the reversals for land and people. The question is, “How does he do it?” the following lines answer this question.

The first sentence reads, ‘for the yoke of his burden and the rod of his shoulder, the rod of his oppressor; You have broken as in the day of Midian’ (9:4). The phrase, ‘the rod of his oppressor’, explains what is meant by ‘yoke of his burden’ and ‘rod of his shoulder’. These are images of prisoners-of-war, hauled off to captivity, yoked together like animals. Such oppression will be broken.

The second statement augments the reversal that the oppressor will experience (9:5). The imagery used is of warriors marching, drenched with the blood of their enemies. Nevertheless, such oppressors will come to a fiery end, becoming fuel for fire. The imagery is drawn from God’s great victory over Midian (Jdgs 6-7) and focuses on the complete defeat of the enemy.

The final sentences clue us to the cause of this amazing reversal of fortunes (9:6-7). It will come at the hands of a child; ‘For . . . a child will be born to us; a son will be given to us’. Instead of ‘the rod of *his shoulder*’, we now see the ‘dominion on *his shoulder*’. The uniqueness of his reign, his nature and character, is encapsulated in the names he is given (9:6). A literal rendering of these names is quite intriguing: Wonder of counselling, God of might, Father of always, Prince of shalom. The constructs employed in these phrases are intended to depict the qualities inherent in this new ruler (wise counselling, might, eternal existence, and wholeness).

- Wonderful Counsellor (see 11:2; 28:29).
- Mighty God (see 10:20-21; Deut 10:17; Neh 9:23; Ps 24:8; 89:14; Jer 32:18).
- Everlasting Father (see 22:21; 63:16; 64:8; Job 29:16; Ps 103:13).
- Prince of peace (2:4; 11:6-9; 42:4; 49:7; 52:15).

The unusual nature of these names points us to someone who is not merely human. Furthermore, his kingdom will be eternal and marked by justice and righteousness. The unit is punctuated with the assertion that ‘the zeal of Yahweh Tseba’ot will do this’ (vs 7). The final demonstrative pronoun guarantees the completion of this vision.

We all live in a world wrecked with ‘war’, literally and metaphorically. Our chief interest is the final termination of such conflict and misery. This messianic vision assures us of the ultimate victory of God and the magnitude of that victory. It is passages like this which offer fuel for faith and sustenance amid suffering.

Isaiah 11:1-16 parallels 9:1-7 structurally and thematically. Both passages present a glimmer of hope about a future king who will usher in an era of righteousness. Both passages provide a frame for the extended judgement scene of Isa 9:8-10:34.

This unit contains a rather intricate structure bound together by several linguistic strands. It is divided into two parts: vs 1-10 and 11-16. The first part is a concentric pattern which begins and ends with references to Jesse: 'the shoot of Jesse' (vs 1) and 'the root of Jesse' (vs 10). In between are sandwiched two sections pertaining to the characteristics of the shoot (vs 2-5) and the conditions ushered in by the shoot (vs 6-9). The second part is a description of the remnant that this king will rescue from all the nations and is enveloped by statements concerning the remnant (see vs 11 and 16). The section is held together by three elements: (1) the eschatological phrase 'in that day'; (2) the word 'banner' in connection with 'peoples' and 'nations'; and (3) the word 'nations'.

Verse 1 introduces the prophecy about the new messianic king in this way: 'There shall go out . . . a SHOOT . . . from the *stump* of Jesse and a BRANCH . . . from his *roots* . . . shall bear fruit'. The 'shoot-stump' image is a direct contrast to the lofty tree metaphor used for Assyria in the preceding prophecy. The echo here with 4:2 and 9:6 is unmistakable; all three passages refer to a messianic figure. The reference to Jesse, father of David, informs us that this new king will be in the Davidic order but far greater than David (see Ezek 34:23-24; Hos 3:5). That new life arises from a stump reflects a recurring theme in Isaiah; the idea that new things appear after God's judgement (4:2; 6:13; 53:2).

'The Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him' (vs 2) provides a direct connection between this messianic king and God's Spirit (see 4:4; 32:15-20; 34:16; 40:7, 13; 42:1; 44:3; 47:16; 48:16; 59:19, 21; 61:1, 3). Whereas the OT gives the impression that God's Spirit empowers people for special tasks (Exod 31:2-3; Jdgs 6:34), there are also instances where individuals enjoy a more permanent filling of the Spirit, as in the case of Moses (Num 11:17), Joshua (Num 27:18), and David (1 Sam 16:13). Evidently, for Isaiah, the Messiah is also endowed with the Spirit (42:1; 59:21; 61:1) as evidenced in the phrases 'the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord'. The messiah experiences a threefold presence of the Spirit.

- 'Wisdom and understanding' are prerequisites to wise leadership (Deut 1:13; 1 Kgs 3:9; Isa 10:13).
- 'Counsel and might' echo the names of the king in 9:6 and are essential to carry out his plans (36:5).
- 'Knowledge and the fear of the Lord' are essentials of wisdom and holiness (see Ps 14:4; Prov 1:7; 2:5; Eccl 7:1-13; in the NT, this verse is fulfilled in Jesus in Matt 3:16-17).

The work of this king is presented in vs 3-5. The 'fear of the Lord' becomes his delight. His task will be one of self-perpetuating justice, favourable to the disenfranchised and instructional. The verbs 'judge' and 'decide' reflect the king's ability to discern more than what he sees or hears (2 Sam 14:20) and to differentiate between appearance and reality. In biblical times, it was the king to whom the poor, lowly, needy and oppressed turned to for justice (2 Sam 12:5; 14:5ff. 2 Kgs 6:26 ff.; etc). However, such help was not always forthcoming (1:17; 3:12; 10:1ff.). This ideal now will be realised in the rule of this king because he will judge the poor and needy properly and strike down the oppressors (49:2; Rev 1:16; 19:15).

The effect of the messiah's work is nothing short of miraculous (vs 6-9). There will be harmony in nature to the extent that predator and prey can co-exist. The predators named here are wolf, lion, leopard and bear. The ravenous nature of these predators is depicted in Jer 5:6 and Dan 7. In those passages as in this one, the animals are also metaphors of the ravenous nations that try to destroy

God's covenant people. What we see here is not just an image of harmony in nature (2:2-5; 4:2-6; 65:25) but also of political and military elements (contrast this with the threats of chapters 7-10). The idea that 'a child shall lead them' refers to both the safety and leadership of the child in this new world. This may also reflect the custom of using a boy or girl as village herder to take out domestic animals in the morning to pasture and bringing them back in the evening (1 Sam 17:34-37). The level of security will be such that even infants are safe in the midst of inherent danger (vs 8). There is also perfect tranquility between people and no one hurts another (vs 9).

Verses 10-11 bear the imprint of strong eschatological strains. Twice the phrase 'in that day' is used. 'In that day' the root of Jesse will become a banner to summon the peoples and nations to the Lord (reversing 9:13; 45:14-15). He will also provide a 'glorious place of rest', an idea observed elsewhere in the OT (Deut 3:20; 12:9; Josh 1:13; 2 Sam 7:11; Pss 95:11; 132:14; and Isa 4:2-5; 60:1-3). 'In that day' becomes a rallying cry for the remnant of the Lord, those who have survived, to return from wherever they are. This event was already prophesied in 2:2-3 and 4:2-6. God will extend his hand to recover the remnant. In Gen 14:19, 22 and Deut 32:6, the verb parallels 'create', while in Exod 15:16 and Ps 74:2 it is used of redemption. The nations named here represent the four corners of the earth: south is Egypt and Cush; north is Assyria and Hamath; east is Elam and Babylon; and west are islands of the sea. God's gathering work is complete and thorough because it is global, creative and redemptive.

In the remaining verses of this passage (vs 12-16), we discover the miraculous nature of the messiah's work as he ensures that his faithful remnant can return safely. The 'banner' will be lifted and the 'dispersed of Israel' will be collected 'from the four corners of the earth'. This is a global task and God's people will return from all over the world. Three groups are evident in this gathering work of God: the nations, the dispersed of Israel and the scattered of Judah. The kingdom of David split shortly after Solomon's death (1 Kgs 12) and the two nations fought several wars with one another (2 Kgs 14:11-14; 16:5-9). With the appearance of the messianic king, the long-lasting enmity between Ephraim and Judah will cease to exist. Instead, the two parts of the Davidic kingdom will become one under the new king and turn into a conquering force, reclaiming territory from the Philistines, Edom, Moab and Ammon; traditional enemies who will be subjugated. As he did during the Exodus, God will again reverse the laws of nature and open up the waters, 'the sea of Egypt' (see Josh 15:2, 5) and the 'Euphrates' (7:20; 8:7), so that the remnant can return. The portrayals of 'waving hand, mighty wind', and 'walking through on foot' allude to the original Exodus story. God will create a highway, a motif that is repeated in 35:8-10; 57:14; and 62:10, for the returning remnant to travel on. The contrast between the remnant who come from all over the world and Israel who came out of Egypt suggests a second exodus, far greater than the original.

The strife of nations and the threats they bear finally give way to a time of tranquility and shalom. This is ushered in by none other than the messianic king who arises from the embers of the Davidic kingdom. The coming of this king brings harmony to the natural world and peace to the human world. The dichotomies of human existence finally give way to an integrated whole accentuated by holiness and the fear of the Lord. The eschatological overtones of the passage clue us to the future and new creation of the messiah. This theme makes its appearance in chapters 2, 4, 9, and here. It will crescendo in the coming chapters as the new creation and future salvation work of God picks up momentum in the book. For now, Isaiah would have us confront the true nature of the messiah's work as global, creative and redemptive. What once was, will pass away; what will be, shall remain.

Some years ago, a large, old tree near my drive way came crashing down during a violent thunderstorm. It very nearly crushed my brand-new car, missing it by mere centimetres. The following morning, I had some people cut it down completely, or so I thought. Much to my chagrin, they left behind a stump. Within weeks that stump had budded new branches and a new tree had

sprung up in place of the old one. This resurgence to new life went largely unnoticed. In a similar way, God's creation and redemption go largely unnoticed but one day will bear fruit. As the Exodus became a type of the first advent of Christ, that first advent becomes the guarantee for the return of Jesus to complete the work of transformation intimated in Isaiah. New life and all that it entails will return to our sin-ruined planet.

LIFE'S SONG TO SING

Isaiah 12

The book of Isaiah is one of the most studied and debated books of the Hebrew Bible. It was prominent in the Qumran collection and inspired great art and music in the Christian era. Today, the book continues to inspire the music of the Church and scholarly research alike. What is unnoticed by many are the songs within the book.

Isaiah employs the three principal Hebrew 'song' terms, *ranan*, *shir*, and *zamar*. These words, in their verbal and nominal forms, occur throughout the book with the exception of chapters 36-39. Altogether, there are 36 occurrences of these words with *ranan* occurring 21 times, *shir* 10 times, and *zamar* 5 times. The words also occur in all three principal segments of the book with a slight concentration in chapters 40-59. They do not appear in the historical interlude (chapters 36-39) and only once (65:14) in the last segment. This particular pattern is observed with most terminological and thematic data in Isaiah. Further, the words appear in imperatival form 9 times suggesting the command to 'sing' is important to the book.

These song words appear most frequently in contexts dealing with God's redemptive work. There are 'songs' connected with the judgement work of God. The book even mentions 'songs' that others sing (for instance, in 25:5 the 'song of the ruthless ones'). However, the majority of the 'songs' belong to the faith community, those who have experienced the redemptive work of God and will continue to do so.

The use of 'song' words in the context of salvation is highly instructive. 'Song' and 'singing' are often portrayed as appropriate responses to the salvation God provides. Even more intriguing is the command (12:6; 42:10; 44:23; 54:1; etc.), reminiscent of the Psalms (see Pss 96:1; 98:1; 147:7; etc.), to sing songs, even new songs, to God. Clearly singing has something to do with worship as well. The role that 'song' and 'singing' have in the life of the faith community will be explored shortly.

Isaiah 12 is the first praise song and climax of the first major segment of Isaiah (chapters 1-12). It is also one of the shorter chapters of the book. The Song contains two of the three song terms used in Isaiah, *zamar* (twice) and *ranan* (once) and consists of two stanzas, 12:1-3 and 12:4-6. The introduction to the Song, 'in that day', (occurring at the onset of each stanza) points to the future when the Song will be sung as response to the salvation God brings. The underlying theme of salvation is encapsulated in the phrases 'God is my salvation' (12:2), 'Yahweh has become my salvation' (12:2) and 'from the wells of salvation' (12:3). These expressions are allusions to Isaiah's own name which means 'Yahweh is salvation'. They are also reminders of the Exodus experience and portray linguistic connections to the song in Exodus 15. Coming so soon after the hope of a 'new exodus' presented in Isa 11, the Song serves a similar liturgical purpose as did the song of Exodus 15.

The first stanza begins in the first person and reflects the personal response of the prophet towards the salvation God provides. This stanza describes the joyful celebration of those whom God has redeemed and offers two reasons for this celebration: God's compassion and salvation. 'In that day' there will be an experience of God's compassion despite his anger and the salvific consequences of such compassion. The desire to praise or thank God exists even though there is recognition of his anger (see 5:25; 9:12, 17, 19, 21; 10:4, 5, 6, 25) because his anger has turned away (6:6-7; 53:4-6) and been replaced by compassion. God is not merely the source of salvation but salvation itself (a play on Isaiah's name) and trusting this God results in redemption. Verse 2 is framed by similar phrases: 'God my salvation . . . he has become my salvation'. The 'song' underscores the realisation that God's redemptive work is the reason for praise. The stanza climaxes with 'You will draw water with joy from the well of salvation'. There is access to and enjoyment of salvation, embedded in the

metaphor of water which also appears in other biblical texts as a symbol of salvation (Pss 36:8; 63:1; 107:35; 143:6; Isa 8:6; 32:2; 35:6-7; 44:3; 55:1; Jer:2:13; John 4:13-14; Rev 7:17; 21:6; 22:17).

The second stanza employs a command structure common to other praise songs in the Hebrew Bible and reiterates the 'in that day' concept. However, the Song moves past the personal tone of the first stanza and extends the call to praise God internationally. More significantly, these verses couple together the call to praise and worship God with the command to declare God to the other nations. The parallelism in 12:4 unveils this dual concept:

In that day you will say:

Give thanks to Yahweh

Call upon his name

Make known his deeds among the nations

Proclaim that his name is exalted

The verse couples praise and worship with mission. These are the twin ideas of the Song. This juxtaposition of liturgical and missiological motifs underpins the entire Song. Isaiah's Song of Praise clearly expresses liturgical and missiological implications. Worship and mission go hand in hand as responses to God. Whereas worship is the proper manner in which to talk to God, mission is the appropriate way of talking about God. The ultimate rationale for such worship is the presence of Yahweh, 'in your midst the Holy One of Israel' (12:6). That God intends to dwell among his people is a motif frequently used in Scripture (Exod 25:8; 40:34; Isa 57:15; Zec 2:10-11; Rev 21:3).

These sentiments are also conveyed in Isa 26:1-21. This Song also begins with the phrase 'in that day' and proceeds to describe the judgement and salvific work of God which is the motivation for the Song. This Song uses two of the three song words, *shir* in 26:1 and *ranan* in 26:19. The verb in 26:19 asserts the intensity of the command. Not only is praise commanded, mission is also spelt out. The Song declares, 'Our desire is for Your name and renown' (26:8). This Song also posits worship alongside mission; the two are inseparable twins.

The missiological impact of 'song' and 'singing' in Isaiah is further enhanced in Isa 42:10-17, another Song of Praise that couples worship with mission. This Song begins with 'Sing a new song to Yahweh' (42:10) but quickly follows this with 'Let them give glory to the Lord and declare His praise in the islands' (42:12). Again, worship and mission go hand in hand.

The church needs to recognise the true significance of song in the life of God's people. Song is the number one tool for worship and mission. For Christians, so accustomed to preaching as the primary tool, the challenge of Isaiah for a different type of tool is especially potent. Christianity is the only living religion that may be viewed as a singing faith. There is an instinct about the role of praise in worship. Isaiah moves us a step further by assigning a similar role to song in mission. We are called (even commanded) to praise God but also to declare his praises.

SQUARE PEG, ROUND HOLE

Isaiah 22

The book of Isaiah contains glimpses of three types of leaders, kings, priests (Levites) and prophets. The book however, concentrates on the office of king and there are several episodes and prophecies relating to them. The two kings Isaiah had to contend with the most were Ahaz and Hezekiah. The prophet's relationship with Ahaz was filled with fire and brimstone; it was ice mixed with fire (see Isa 7-8). His relationship with Hezekiah was full of promise but also heart-breaking disappointment (see Isa 36-39). The Bible considers Ahaz an evil king, while Hezekiah is deemed God-fearing. Unnoticed in these confrontations between the prophet and the kings is a prophecy involving two high officials of Judah's court. What Isaiah says about these two men teaches a great deal about leadership.

For many Bible students, Shebna and Eliakim are unfamiliar names. The names appear in chapter 22 of Isaiah in the midst of a series of judgement prophecies. The appearance of these names in such a dramatic segment of Isaiah is highly provocative. While pronouncing judgements against nations, God also announces the future of two men, Shebna and Eliakim. Why did God do this? What is intended by this inclusion? Who were these men? What are the applicable lessons of this particular prophecy?

Isaiah 13-23 comprises a litany of judgement messages, mostly directed at the nations of the world, though not exclusively so. There are fifteen separate judgement statements or oracles and the judgemental nature of Isa 13-23 is further underscored by the prevalence of God's militaristic title, Yahweh Tseba'ot (The Lord of Armies/Hosts). The title appears 24 times (13:4, 13, 22, 23; 14:24, 27; 17:3; 18:7 [twice]; 19:4, 12, 16, 17, 18, 20, 25; 21:10; 22:5, 12, 14 [twice], 15, 25; and 23:9) in this collection of oracles. God is portrayed as the divine warrior out to judge the nations.

Shebna and Eliakim

Whereas most of the oracles in the collection target different nations or places, Isa 22:15-25 is the only prophecy whose target is a person. The placement of such a prophecy in this collection is rather nebulous but the tenor of the message is not that dissimilar from the rest of the oracles.

The unit is made up of two halves: (1) vs 15-19 which forecast the demise of Shebna, and (2) vs 20-25 which raise the prospect that God will choose someone else to honour, a man named Eliakim. Isa 22:1-15 is enveloped by two divine speeches—'this is what the Lord, Yahweh Tseba'ot says' in vs 15 and 'for Yahweh has spoken' in vs 25. Further, the subject matter between the two halves of chapter 22 is entirely different; one addresses a place, the other a person. However, because both prophecies concern the nation of Judah, their placement in the chapter is expected and explainable.

God commands Isaiah to 'go to this steward, to Shebna, who is over the household' with a message (vs 15). This is most likely the same Shebna spoken of in 2 Kgs 18:18, 26 and Isa 36:3. His job designation is *soken*. The word appears in feminine form for 'maidservant' or 'nurse' (1 Kgs 1:2, 4). Here the term refers to someone who represents the king. The title 'who is over the household' indicates a high-ranking government official. It was first used in the list of Solomon's officials (1 Kgs 4:6) and is also mentioned in 1 Kgs 16:9; 18:3; and 2 Kgs 15:5. By the time of Hezekiah, the person with this title appears to be in the same position that Joseph had in Egypt (Gen 40-44; 45:8). In 2 Kgs 15:5, Jotham, while serving as co-regent with his father, was accorded this title. Later in Isa 36:3, Eliakim would bear this title. At this point in Isaiah, Shebna is the virtual second in command in the court of Judah.

The reason for the judgement against Shebna is his pride and love of luxury (vs 16). This attitude is observed in the luxurious burial arrangements he made for himself. An elaborate tomb outside Jerusalem with the inscription 'Tomb of the Royal Steward' may be the tomb of Shebna, but this is far from certain. Because of this, God pronounces judgement upon Shebna (vs 17-18). In rather graphic terms, Shebna is told that God will shake him violently, roll him into a ball and sling him into a 'wide land' (an obscure reading). The word play in these verses is difficult to capture in English. A transliterated reading shows what God said:

mtaltelka taltelah (from *tul*, 'to hurl or overwhelm') . . .
w'otkah 'atoh (from '*atah*, 'to seize') . . .
tsanop yitsnapka tsnepah (from *tsanap*, 'to whirl')

The word play and the severity of the punishment are best understood with this suggested reading:

'he will overwhelm you with overwhelming . . .
 he will seize you with seizing . . .
 whirling, he will whirl you with whirling'

The imagery suggests the work of a slinger and depicts the act of slinging Shebna so as to bring about his demise. With the help of a simple chiasm, Shebna's fate is given a final twist (vs 19):

(a) 'I will thrust you'
 (b) 'from your office and'
 (b') 'from your station'
 (a') 'he will cast you down'

God removes Shebna from office. By the time Sennacherib, the Assyrian king, invaded Judah (around 701 BC) Shebna had already been demoted to the position of secretary (see Isa 36:3; 2 Kgs 18:18).

However, God does not merely discard Shebna, but chooses his replacement, Eliakim (vs 20). Two things are said about Eliakim (see Neh 12:41; 2 Kgs 23:34; Matt 1:13 for others with the same name). God refers to him as 'my servant' and he is Hilkiah's son (this is not Hilkiah, Jeremiah's father). The designation 'my servant' is applied to Isaiah himself (Isa 20:3) and especially to the messiah in the Servant Poems (Isa 42-53). The title appears elsewhere in the OT as a designation of God's special leaders such as Moses (Num 12:7). The name implies that Eliakim was an effective and godly official. The reference to his father normally indicates that he came from a highly placed family. Eliakim had an important background which may have prepared him for office.

Great honour will be bestowed on Eliakim. He will wear the robes that fit his station (vs 21). He will have the same authority that Shebna held; he will become second ruler in Judah. He will be 'like a father' to the people. The idea of 'father' implies he will be respected by everyone and have a close relationship with the people. The same idea was also attributed to Joseph in Pharaoh's court (Gen 45:8). God will give Eliakim the key to David's house and 'what he opens, no one can close; what he closes, no one can open' (vs 22). In Rev 3:7, the imagery of David's key is applied to Jesus, making this a messianic prophecy. His place will be assured, his throne will be an honoured one (vs 23) and the burden of government will fall on his shoulders. All these descriptions are messianic in nature and point to someone who would be special to God but also serve as type of an even greater one to come.

Tragically, Eliakim's story ends on a sour note (vs 25). Eliakim, the peg that was in a secured place (vs 20) will be loosed, cut down and fall. No reason is spelled out for his fall but three reasons are

possible: the glory and burden of government became too heavy, someone destroyed him or success got to his head and exposed him to divine judgement. The last one is a likely suspect in this particular setting.

Two Leadership Models

The passage tells the story of two men who occupied positions of authority and power and in so doing provide us with significant leadership paradigms. Shebna abused his position for personal gains. His love of luxury and celebrity lifestyle became the reasons for his downfall. Shebna's 'this-worldly' approach to life depicts a self-serving desire to secure his 'place in history' through personal effort. Shebna measured himself by the chariots he had and the ornate tomb he prepared for himself. This type of leader is more concerned about his benefits than the needs of his subordinates. Protecting his rights and authority are paramount to his view of life. Leaders like Shebna probably measure themselves in very materialistic ways: the cars they drive, the home they live in, the educational achievement of their children, the number of titles they are given and so on and so forth. We can almost visualise such leaders promoting their cause vociferously and going out of their way to win votes. We may also surmise that such leaders are prepared to use flattery and unethical conduct to achieve their goals. They lack genuine integrity and yet are accepted as leaders of God's people and may be admired by some.

In the book of Isaiah, king Ahaz fit this model quite well. Not only was he a godless person, he was a truly 'this-worldly' individual. He lived the ideal of 'I did it my way.' He took pride in his accomplishments and even refused the help of God (Isa 7) when he needed it. He was quick in seeking favourable alliances to promote his cause and it did not matter that some of these alliances (particularly the Assyrian alliance) were highly questionable. He surrounded himself with counsellors who would say anything to win his favour and to whom truth was subjugated to political convenience. He bred a nation filled with injustice and inequality. Corruption was rife in Judah and yet he arduously maintained that he was the rightful king of Judah. This is one way to lead.

By contrast, Eliakim was a 'Servant' of God, chosen and blessed. He did not vie for power or seek to get himself in position. This type of leader would probably stay out of the limelight and prefer to let God lead. His willingness to defer to God made him a fit servant. When we peruse through the sacred pages of the Bible, we discover that many of God's chosen leaders carried the same sense of deference and often felt unfit for the task. Moses, Jeremiah, Gideon, Barak, Timothy and many others were hesitant to step into the forefront despite assurances that God had chosen them. Such leaders are trustworthy and highly spiritual. They lead with truth, justice and equity. They treat everyone alike and show no favouritism towards those who flatter them. They measure themselves by an inner integrity and their walk with God.

Nevertheless, the Eliakim story contains a sour ending and reveals the danger that would cause the downfall of even the most righteous leader. Eliakim, because of his success, ran the risk of becoming the person others turn to instead of God. The double use of 'in that day' (a statement usually associated with eschatological judgement) with regards to Eliakim reveals that God's actions have a dual role, to build up and to tear down. Eliakim's ability to attract the trust and confidence of people unveils the hidden danger of reliance on a human person replacing reliance on God. The end is equally calamitous.

In the book of Isaiah, we meet another king, Hezekiah. He was as different from his father, Ahaz, as any son could be. Hezekiah was one of the truly godly kings of Judah. He did everything right in the sight of God. He avoided the worldly alliances of his father. He heeded the counsels of Isaiah, the prophet of God. He initiated a massive reformation programme in the land that culminated in a

grand Passover celebration (2 Chron 29-30). He was loved by God. But, even the very best are prone to believing that they are special. Therefore, when God indicated that it was time for Hezekiah to die, he threw a tantrum and accused God of not repaying his faithfulness fairly (Isa 38). Yet, when God acceded to his pleas, cured him of his illness and restored his health, Hezekiah expressed his gratitude by taking credit for his success (Isa 39). Even a God-fearing leader is prone to 'the big-head syndrome'.

The book of Isaiah offers only two models of leadership. Ahaz and Hezekiah were the main kings the prophet had to contend with. Shebna and Eliakim are the only two individuals incorporated into a series of judgement oracles. There seems to be an intentionality on the part of the prophet to highlight these two particular models of leadership. One is a model of street-smart, self-serving leaders who operate outside of the will of God even though they may be leading God's people. Just because a leader is 'king of Judah' does not automatically translate into godly leadership. The other is a model of God-fearing leaders who allow the elation of human praise to affect their integrity. Such leaders are chosen by God, but sadly, make themselves vulnerable to divine displeasure because they assume the mantle that belongs to God himself. Their inflated sense of indispensability undermines their relationship with God. In either case, God considers such leaders as failures.

Shebna's self-serving life and Eliakim's magnetic personal presence both deny God his rightful honour and both are liable to divine judgement. Whether the leader does it his way or becomes inflated in his sense of importance, it is God who is dishonoured. Those who are appointed to or chosen for positions of leadership must be cognizant of God's presence at all times so as to avoid the twin dangers of self-reliance and inflated sense of importance.

HOLY HIGHWAY

Isaiah 35 and 55

Isaiah 35 is the first Song of the Redeemed and it is also the climax of the first segment of Isaiah. In this Song, only the word *ranan* is used but it is used three times in 35:2, 6, 10. In these instances, the word describes the joyful celebration of liberation by nature and humans alike and ultimately by the redeemed. The song comprises three stanzas describing the transformation of nature (35:1-2), the transformation of disabled humanity (35:4-6a) and the experience of the redeemed who are transformed by God's salvific act (35:6b-10). This seems the most plausible arrangement of the song but there is no consensus on the matter. Some scholars divide the Song into three stanzas, while others see six possible stanzas. The Song contains an *inclusio* or envelope (35:1 and 35:10) which uses the words 'glad' and 'gladness'. Also, the term *ranan* appears at the beginning, the middle, and the end of the Song.

The Song forms a theological bridge to the rest of the book, especially chapters 40-59. As such, it is the gateway between the doom and gloom of the first segment and the bright lights of salvation and hope of the second segment. The prominence of 'song' and 'singing' at this stage is crucial to our understanding.

The singing of nature, the disabled and the redeemed underscores the primacy of 'song' to worship and mission. If anything, the missiological aspect is heightened in the Song of the Redeemed. The most complete way of talking about God is to 'sing' of what he has done. Worship must inevitably lead to mission; the two are inseparable twins in the life of the redeemed. Because of salvation, God's people are able to worship him in joyful celebration and declare his works to all at hand with energy. Truly, 'the redeemed of the Lord will come to Zion with singing' (35:10).

At the end of Isaiah's first segment, we encounter in the first Song of the Redeemed, the twin pillars in the life of God's pilgrims, worship and mission. Singing is an appropriate way of expressing both. Redemption motivates people to worship God in joyful celebration and declare his work to everyone with energy. The Song anticipates the extended deliberation about salvation in Isa 40-55, a segment of the book that also reaches a high point in a similar song of the redeemed (Isa 55).

A prominent motif of the Song is that of 'highway'. The highway metaphor is a truly creative way to picture the experience of God's pilgrims. One of the main highways in Thailand is Mittrapap Highway (Highway 2). Mittrapap is Thai for 'friendship' and this highway is colloquially referred to as 'Friendship Highway'. However, Mittrapap highway has a very high rate of accidents. It is not a very friendly highway; it is quite dangerous. God's Holy Highway will be safe and secure and those who journey on it need not fear the dangers posed by speeding drivers because the only things to overtake them on this highway are joy and gladness. If we have anxious hearts, we should pay close attention to the assurance of God who says to us, 'Be strong, fear not!' (35:4).

In the next high point of the book (Isa 55), the redeemed sing a song to celebrate their deliverance. The song is both an invitation to experience God's salvific work and an assurance that God keeps his promise. This Song of the Redeemed begins with a triple invitation to 'come . . . come . . . come' (vs 1-5), followed by a triple command to 'seek . . . call . . . forsake' (vs 6-9). The invitation and command are followed by two subunits which open with 'for'. The first provides analogy for certainty (vs 10-11), while the second outlines consequences (vs 12-13).

This Song of the Redeemed is a parallel to the one in chapter 35. In both instances, the songs serve as the pinnacle of the individual segments of the book. Both songs mark the peak of specific movements of Isaianic thought. This Song begins with an invitation to come to God for all our needs

and wants (vs 1) and culminates in the vibrant joy of the redeemed which is shared even by nature (vs 12-13). The celebration of redemption is another recurring theme in the Bible. The Israelites, on the eastern shores of the Red Sea celebrated their liberation (Exod 15). The redeemed in Isaiah celebrate their salvation (Isa 35 and 55). The final redeemed of all ages will stand in the presence of Almighty God and celebrate their freedom from sin (Rev 19). Praise is the final response to God's activity on behalf of his people. This is why the redeemed sing!

I once attended a thanksgiving service and learned that the reason for the service was to express gratitude to God for bringing the institution through some difficult financial years. Unfortunately, I also noticed that there had been no thanksgiving service during the preceding lean years. I could not help but wonder about the theological instinct which leads us to give thanks when we get what we want but not when God allows the trials and tests. The Israelites had experienced the most stupendous event of history, the Exodus, and celebrated with great verve. However, not long after that celebration they were griping endlessly about the harshness of life in the desert. I think that we ought to learn constant praise even, and especially, when things do not go our way. To give thanks and praise when we get what we want is rather constricting. What we need is a broadened sense of gratitude and praise which will allow us to see the hand of God in every circumstance of life. This is how we travel the 'holy highway'.

WRONG U-TURN

Isaiah 38-39

Isaiah 36-39 may be viewed as a structural pivot of the book and serves as interlude between the first and second sections of Isaiah. Moreover, the chapters are predominantly in prose in contrast to the rest of the book. These chapters contain some significant historical information which situates Isaiah's ministry in a specific way. The entire narrative reveals the work of the prophet with one particular king of Judah, King Hezekiah. The specificity of the history is demonstrated by the mention of dates and names of foreign rulers and unveils the ups and downs of life in the political arena. The account of events is corroborated both in the Bible and outside of it. Isaiah 36-39 is an almost word-for-word repeat of 2 Kgs 18:13-20:19. These events are also recorded in 2 Chron 32:1-31 and in the Annals of Sennacherib. While there are striking similarities in the four accounts, there are also important differences as each account serves a distinct purpose and function.

Chapter 38 tells of the illness of Hezekiah which almost resulted in his death (probably around 701 BC). It includes a poem by Hezekiah to celebrate his miraculous recovery from his sickness. At first glance, Hezekiah's poem, which occupies pride of place in chapter 38, appears to be a masterpiece of contrite acceptance of God's will. It seems to pull all the correct theological strings with such statements as 'Yahweh will save me' (vs 20). Nevertheless, the poem camouflages the complexity of Hezekiah's inner musings. In the story we discover that this king did not accept God's initial diagnosis with dignity. He questions the justice of his situation and lays claim to being a servant faithful enough to warrant special treatment (vs 3). Even in the poem we detect some of these feelings (see vs 10-14). What we also see in the passage is the nature of God's will and the gracefulness of his dealings with his frail servants.

The stories of the Bible demonstrate over and over that God will change his mind to accommodate our frailties, especially our struggle to accept his will in our lives. He allows for opportunities that may not be part of his original plan. God does this with Hezekiah, Abraham, Jacob, David and a host of others. Yet, in every story where this happens, there are unfortunate consequences to this divine change of heart. As I have grown in my understanding of God, I have come to realise that it may be better to live with God's Plan A rather than seek a Plan B or Plan C. Had Hezekiah accepted the initial will of God, we would not be reading about his great *faux pas*.

Chapter 39 records one of the most tragic events in biblical history and in the book. Here is the story of a man who by all account was a godly ruler and was miraculously delivered from a fatal illness. However, blessing turned into curse when Hezekiah failed to acknowledge God for his healing. More than any other chapter in Isaiah, chapter 39 reveals the tragedy that potentially awaits even the truly godly servants of God. The lesson embedded here is found in several passages but the unique feature of this story pertains to the fall of a godly king. Hezekiah's fall was not a moral failure but a spiritual one. The miracle God performed for him brought blessings few ever receive and yet those very blessings became Hezekiah's achilles' heel. When humans forget the source of their blessings, tragedy will overtake them. By not acknowledging God and by displaying himself, Hezekiah was pretending that what had happened is of his own doing. When this happens, blessings become a curse instead.

We live in an era of faith where parading our righteousness and success is almost second nature, contrary to the counsel of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount (see Matt 6). I recall a centennial celebration I attended where every church paraded its choir and achievements. The music was great but it also left behind a feeling that the choirs were not truly praising God, rather they were competing with each other to see which one had the best costumes and sang the best. The reports were full of praise for pastors and churches who had gone beyond every goal set for growth and

evangelism. What is truly intriguing about this approach is that we may still invoke God's name while we take glory for ourselves. I also once attended a testimonial service where a new 'convert' was given time to tell us what it meant being a disciple of Jesus. What struck me about his testimony was there was no mention of Jesus in the speech but only self-praise. Things like, 'When I became a Christian, I got better grades', or 'When I became a Christian, I got more money'. The mind boggling one, 'When I became a Christian, I got a better girlfriend'. The Hezekiah syndrome is like driving on black ice. We may not see the danger but it can play havoc in our relationship with God.

ON WINGS OF EAGLES

Isaiah 40-41

In Isa 40:1-41:14, opening with 'Comfort, comfort my people; speak to the heart of Jerusalem', Yahweh comforts his people. This is the passage assuring God's people that in Yahweh they will find comfort, strength and redemption because the Holy One of Israel has declared his salvific intention toward Israel. A quick perusal of the unit reveals this intention of God.

- Isa 40:1-11 provides evidences of divine comfort and refers to the one who will make this happen for Zion
- Isa 40:12-17 poses questions of and provides answers to God's incomparability
- Isa 40:18-31 is a quadruple series of questions and answers
- Isa 41:1-7 contains a covenant-lawsuit against Israel followed by more questions and answers
- Isa 41:8-14 concludes the unit with more discussion about Jacob and Jerusalem

The heartbeat of this unit is 40:27-31. A rhetorical question to challenge Israel's faith is presented: 'Why do you say?' God is true to his covenant even when his people lose faith. The complaint of Israel, 'My way is hidden from Yahweh' (vs 27), is countered by questions echoing vs 21. God is the eternal creator who 'does not faint or grow weary' and whose wisdom is without limits; God is not limited temporally or spatially or in terms of wisdom (vs 28). Furthermore, he gives this power to the 'faint' and the one without 'might' (vs 29). The contrast in the next two verses says it all:

Even youths shall faint and grow weary
And young men shall fall exhausted (literally, 'stumbling they stumble'; also Lam 5:13);
but they who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength;
they shall mount up with wings like eagles;
they shall run and not be weary;
they shall walk and not faint.

Not only is God supremely powerful, his empowering capability is equally complete.

Chapter 40 of the book marks the turning point in God's dealings with Israel. The doom and gloom of the earlier section is lifted and the tone shifts from judgment to redemption. The very first words in the passage refer to the comfort that God desires for his people (40:1). While there are still questions to be answered, the paradigm has definitely transitioned into a different approach that God adopts towards his people. This is not merely a change of style but substance as well because the divine repulsion so vividly expressed in chapter 1 is replaced by empathy in this passage. The God we now meet is a God still in love with his people.

As God's people today, we also need to be always mindful that God cannot condone sin in our lives and wherever sin exists, judgement follows. Nevertheless, to see God only as judge of our wrongdoings is not the entire picture. What God most desires for his people is to help us out of our sin-based predicament. God's empathy is driven by his fatherhood and genuine love for his people. He will challenge us but also stand steadfastly by us.

FIRES AND FLOODS

Isaiah 43:1-7

Isaiah 43:1-7 displays a marked sense of symmetry in its structure and meaning. There is a consistent use of 1st and 2nd personal pronouns and synonyms (for example, creation terms such as *bara'*, *yatsar*, and *'asah*). It also exhibits a well-defined structure.

The entire pericope is framed by a creation inclusio or envelope (vss 1 and 7) using *bara'* and *yatsar* 'he who created . . . he who formed' and adding *'asah* in verse 7b 'whom I created . . . formed . . . made'. The verb *bara'* is a more general reference to creation (see Gen1), while *yatsar* depicts a more intimate term indicating painstaking care (Gen 2:7). The final verb, *'asah*, appears to be a summary term for creation (see Gen 1:31).

Sandwiched within the creation inclusio are references to covenant. God tells his people not to fear because he has 'redeemed' them. The verb here is also used to refer to the Exodus experience (Exod 6:6; 15:13) and Ruth's redemption by Boaz (Ruth 3:13) and may have carried legal connotations, serving as a technical term of family law. The covenant is further emphasised by the statements, 'I am Yahweh your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Saviour' (vs 3; Exod 20:2; Deut 5-6; Josh 24) and 'I have called you by name' (vss 1 and 7). The act of naming has both covenantal (see Gen 17:5; 32:28; Exod 33:12, 16) and creation overtones (see Gen 1:5, 8, 10; Isa 40:16; Ps 147:4).

Isaiah intertwines creation with redemption here and elsewhere in the book (41:8-20; 44:1-2; 45:15, 17; etc.). A further reminder of the covenant is evidenced in the twin ideas of exchange and gathering. God promises he will exchange the nations for his people (vss 3-4) and he will gather his people from all corners of the globe (verse 5-6). The verb 'gather' is frequently employed for God's proleptic act of providing his people a future despite the punishment of exile and diaspora (see Pss 106:47; 107:3; Isa 11:12; 54:7; Jer 23:3; 29:14; 31:8, 10; 32:37; Ezek 11:17; 20:34, 41; 28:25; 33:13; 36:24; 37:21; 39:27; Mic 2:12; etc.). The final reminder of God's commitment to the covenant is also the *raison d'être* of the passage expressed succinctly in the words, 'Because you are precious in my eyes, and honoured, and I love you' (vs 4).

As a loved people, Israel's existence is mission-driven; they exist to declare God as the only God (43:8-13). As strange as it may sound, God's glory rests in his willingness to redeem fallen humanity. This divine act binds us so closely to God that there is no power capable of separating us from his love (see Rom 8:38-39). Raging floods and wild fires cannot get the better of God's people (43:1-7) and we are worth more to God than any other object or being. God's willingness to act on behalf of his people is the outflowing of divine sentiment; 'I love you' (43:4), God exclaims. It is this love that glorifies God and provides his people with identity as witness to the world (43:8-13).

The promise of God's presence in our lives is the single most repeated promise of Scripture. It is embedded in the names Yahweh and Immanuel. It is repeated to every patriarch and prophet. It is the sum total of God's commitment to his people. One of the most asked questions of faith is, 'God, where are you?' Losing sight of God's presence is almost reflex action when people are in pain. However, it is the very thing most needed to support us in the most trying times. Therefore, God says, 'Do not be afraid, I am with you'.

WHAT A SERVANT!

Isaiah 42; 49; 50; 52-53

The unique contribution of chapters 40-59 of Isaiah pertains to the 'servant' imagery which does not appear in such concentrated form anywhere else in Scripture. It is a well-established fact that this imagery is presented in a series of 'songs' (referred to as 'poems' here) which are integral to Isaiah's redemptive and messianic message.

Isaiah 42:1-9 First Servant Poem: Introducing Yahweh's Servant

The first strophe of the Poem commences with two parallel verbal clauses, 'my servant I support him' and 'my chosen one my soul delights in' (vs 1a; see 41:8-9; 43:10, 20; 44:1-2; 45:4; 49:7). This is followed by a simple chiasm (vs 1b; 48:16; 59:21; 61:1; Num 11:25-26):

- (a) I have given
- (b) my spirit upon him
- (b) justice for the nations
- (a) he will bring out

The last verb introduces the universal work of this Servant, that of causing justice to be effected on behalf of the world's inhabitants. The term 'justice' is employed three times in this first strophe, making up more than a quarter of the occurrences in the segment. The uncontested rule of God is a running theme in the Servant Poems as the word 'justice' appears in every Poem.

Verses 2-4 present a litany of tasks that the Servant will accomplish: 'He shall not cry out', 'he shall not lift up' and 'he shall not make his voice heard in the street' (vs 2). All three verbs are preceded by the negative particle and provide a sense of permanence to the Servant's work. To 'cry out' expresses the cry for deliverance by the oppressed (Exod 22:22; 2 Kgs 6:26). The Servant does not call out for help or raise his voice for everyone to hear. His work is also marked by gentleness for 'a crushed reed he shall not break' and 'a dim wick he shall not extinguish it' (vs 3). Unlike the ruthless conquerors of history, the Servant defends the weak (11:4; 40:11). The verbs here continue with the tone of the previous verse but there is a climactic statement, 'for truth he will bring out justice' (vs 3). The phrase probably means that the Servant will bring out justice truthfully. Verse 4 speaks about the resilience and gentleness of the Servant's work. 'He will not faint' and 'he will not [be] crushed' (vs 4). Here we also find climactic statements introduced by 'until he sets upon the earth justice and for his law coastlands wait'.

The second strophe of the poem opens with a messenger formula 'this is what God Yahweh says' (vs 5) which is found only here and in Ps 85:9. This is followed by a series of appositional participial clauses common in Psalms (68:20; 77:15; 85:8; 104:2) and other oracles of Isaiah (43:1, 14; 44:2, 6, 24; 45:11, 18): 'who created the heavens, who stretched them out' (40:22; 44:24; 45:12, 18), 'who spread out the earth (Ps 136:6) and its produce (a word that occurs only in Job [31:8] and Isaiah [here and 34:1])', and 'who gives breath (Gen 2:7) to the people on it and spirit to those who walk on it (Ps 104:29-30)'. The two terms, 'breath' and 'spirit', also appear as a pair in Isa 57:16 and Job 32:8; 33:4. This is a rather comprehensive description of the God who speaks to his Servant and the ensuing divine speech comprises two 'I am Yahweh' statements in vss 6-7 and 8-9.

The four clauses in vs 6 express what God does for the Servant:

- I have called you in righteousness;
- I have strengthened your hand;

I have guarded you; and
I have given you for a covenant of people (49:8), for a light of nations.

God is light (Ps 27:1), God's light guides one on the right path (42:16; 50:10; 51:4-5; 119:105) and God's salvation is light (49:6; Ps 37:6; Mic 7:9). Here we see the dual task of the Servant, one national, the other universal (see also 2:2-4; 19:18-25; 60:1-14). Verse 7 describes further the task that the Servant will perform:

To open the eyes of the blind ('a metaphor for freeing captives') and
To bring out from dungeon prisoners, from house of confinement (prison) those who live in darkness

God declares, 'I am Yahweh, that is my name' (vs 8; see 43:7; 47:4; 48:1, 2, 9; 50:10; 51:15; 52:5, 6; 54:5) 'and my glory I have not given to another nor my praise to idols' (41:16; 48:11). Therefore, God is able to supply incontestable proofs of his ability: 'Look! The former things have happened and the new things I am declaring'. The last word could also be translated 'I have declared'. The thought reaches its climax with before 'they sprout up; I have told you'. The prophetic nature of God's work is what distinguishes him from everyone else.

The introduction of the Servant is a significant move in the book as it brings us face to face with the one designated to extricate humans from sin. The passage asserts that God is always in control and as such will find ways to resolve the human predicament. God's ultimate solution is to send his Servant, a theme that will be reprised over and over in Isa 40-59. Yet, there is another part to this work of God, human response. The concluding portion of the passage tells us that praise is the most appropriate response to God's salvific work, also a recurring theme in the book.

One unifying factor of human life (despite all the differences) is the tendency to murmur. Even in the best of times and in the midst of blessings, God's people, like Israel in the wilderness, are prone to complain. Doing this causes spiritual myopia, a condition that requires special medication. The medication for a life of murmur is praise. Songs of praise are the aspirin or paracetamol of faith as they enable us to lift up our eyes to the help that rises higher than the highest mountains (Ps 121).

Isaiah 49:1-7 The Second Servant Poem: The Mission of Yahweh's Servant Elaborated

The Servant of the Lord introduced in chapter 42 now elaborates on his mission to bring light and salvation to the world. The Servant speaks about his mission and commences his reflections with a double imperative (see 40:1) accompanied with addressees. 'Listen to me, coastlands; pay attention, far away peoples'. The call is universal and everyone is invited to hear. The second line of vs 1 digresses from normal syntax by placing the subject first. 'Yahweh from the womb called me, from my mother's womb he named my name' (lit. 'he remembered my name'). The Servant claims he is called before birth, a concept also understood by Jeremiah (Jer 1:5) and Paul (Gal 1:15). The act of naming is paramount to the choice of the Servant (43:1; 45:3-4) who proceeds to list the things God does for him:

He made my words (lit. 'mouth') like a sharp sword/dagger ('Sword' here refers to a short dagger which can be concealed in one's palm; Rev 1:16);
He hid me in the shadow of His hand.
He made me like a sharpened arrow (Deut 32:23. 42);
He hid me in His quiver.

The imagery of sword and arrow speak of offensive weaponry (Pss 57:5; 64:4; Jer 9:7), while the act of hiding refers to the defensive, protective work of God. The final divine act is God's choice made abundantly clear: 'He said to me, 'You are my Servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified' (vs 3). Israel here could refer to the nation (41:8, 9; 42:1, 19; 43:10; 44:1, 2, 21, 26; 45:4) but most likely it is an idealised picture of the Servant.

The Servant's introspection however makes him view his task as fruitless (vs 4) and he says, 'In vain I laboured for nothing (*tohu*) and nothing (*hebel*) my strength I have spent'. The use of *tohu* (from the Genesis creation account) and *hebel* (prominent in the discourses of Qohelet) speak of a depressing frame of mind afflicting the Servant. Nevertheless, he clings firmly to his election as evidenced in his words, 'Surely my justice with Yahweh and my recompense/reward with my God'. The parallelism between justice and reward (see also 40:10; 61:8; 62:11; 65:7) suggests that justice be understood in the sense of 'vindication' (see HCSB, The NET Bible) or a 'case' (JPS) in a courtroom.

God tells the Servant whom he has chosen even before birth that his mission is the restoration of Israel, 'to bring back Jacob to him and to gather Israel to him' (vs 5). The Servant also knows he is honoured by Yahweh and finds strength in God to accomplish his mission. The task of the Servant is driven home further in vs 6: 'to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to bring back the preserved of Israel', to be 'a light for the nations' (42:6; 60:3), and to extend salvation 'to the ends of the earth'. The dual task of the Servant defines the purpose of his life. The future restoration of Israel has a global purpose (see 2:1-5; 14:1-3; 19:18-25; 42:6; 45:18-25); God works through his Servant to accomplish salvation both for Israel and the world.

The Poem ends with an appropriate 'this is what Yahweh says' (vs 7), the one who is Redeemer of Israel. The Servant's apparent humiliation, despised and abhorred (also 53:3), will be reversed to the extent that kings and princes shall prostrate themselves before him (52:15). All this because Yahweh, the Holy One of Israel, is 'faithful' and 'has chosen' the Servant. The root verb employed here, whose primary meaning is 'to be firm', has become common fare to believers in the nominal form, Amen. Yahweh is Amen.

The second Servant Poem elaborates on the mission of God's Servant, the messiah of the world. The work of the Servant is marked by a singularity of purpose, to bring glory to God (49:3). However, this is not a one-way street because God in turn promises that the servant will be elevated above all authorities and powers (49:7). In a manner of speaking, all believers are servants of God. Our task is to bring glory to God through our lives and mission. The Church has been tasked with being the light of the world (Matt 5:14) and thus giving glory to God. There is great reward in being the servants of God. We become his children, his heirs and the inheritors of his dominion and rule for eternity (Rev 3:21; 20:6). The grandeur of this promise makes those who are servants, co-rulers with God.

Isaiah 50:4-11 The Third Servant Poem: The Servant's Relationship to Yahweh

In the third Servant Poem, the Servant of the Lord declares his relationship to and dependence upon Yahweh. The Poem commences with the dominant syntactical feature (vs 4), 'Lord (*'adonai*) Yahweh gives to me', which also recurs in vss 5, 7, 8, with different verbs. When the two names occur together, they emphasise God's sovereignty over the nations and his covenant with Israel. The phrase 'those taught' serves as a literary inclusio for the verse. God has given the Servant the ability to use his words to sustain the weary and it is God who 'wakens' (used twice) his Servant every 'morning' (also used twice) so he may carry out his mission.

Lord Yahweh also opens (35:5; 48:8) the Servant's ears (22:14; 2 Sam 7:27) who pledges his loyalty to God by saying, 'I was not rebellious and backward I did not turn' (vs 5). There is total commitment

to the work ahead of him with no thought of regressing. Furthermore, the Servant speaks of his willingness to suffer humiliation for the sake of his mission. In a three-line parallelism creating a crescendo of body parts, he says:

My back I gave to the smiters
 My cheeks to those who pull out beard
 My face I did not hide from shame or spitting (vs 6)

He suffers verbal and physical abuse and, despite appearances, the Servant's humiliation is a voluntary one.

Lord Yahweh comes to the aid of his Servant and helps him. Consequently, the Servant is able to declare authoritatively, 'I am not confounded, I set my face as flint, I know I will not be shamed' (vs 7; also 42:17). He may be humiliated but he is not disgraced because he knows that his vindicator is near (vs 8). Such is the confidence with which he challenges his accusers. Using litigation language (the verse is filled with legal terminology), he boldly makes his defence:

Who will contend with me? Let us stand up.
 Who will be lord (*ba'al*) of my judgement? Let him come near.

The phrase 'lord of my judgement' (see also 49:4) occurs only here in the Hebrew Bible and probably serves as a technical legal term meaning 'my accuser'. This is a plaintiff confidently confronting the prosecutor's case and doing so because of the assurance that the judge is on his side (see vs 9).

'Look', says the Servant, 'Lord Yahweh helps me. Who declares me guilty?' (vss 9-10; see Rom 8:1-39). Whatever happens he entrusts his case to his vindicator. A second 'Look' establishes the opposite fact, the ultimate demise of all his detractors like cloth eaten away by time and nature (vs 9). His confidence is twofold, that the verdict will go his way and his opponents will be routed. A final 'Who?' is followed by a series of complex parallel lines (vs 10):

Who[ever] fears Yahweh
 (a) obeys his Servant's voice
 (b) who[ever] walks in darkness
 (b) there is no light for him
 (a) yet trusts in Yahweh and relies on his God

Finally, in vs 11, comes the exclamation, 'Look all of you' who kindle fire or set sticks alight. The ensuing command is for such people to 'walk by the light of your fire, by the sticks of your kindle'. The verse closes with an emphasis on the completion of the Servant's task; it is from his hand!

The Servant dominates the landscape of Isaiah 40-59. The passage at hand spells out the relationship between the Servant and Yahweh in two ways, what God gives to his Servant and how God helps his Servant. God has given him the gift of speech to sustain the weary (vs 4a), the capacity to hear the needs of the weak (vs 4b-5) and the ability to bear the misfortunes brought about by his mission (vs 6). Divine help or support becomes the Servant's strength, keeping him steadfast in his mission and in the face of adversity (vss 7-9). Consequently, those who hear the Servant's message are called to respond appropriately.

People who spend their entire lives in service to God often go through the highs and lows that such a life brings. There are days of weakness and days of strength. There are even days when we feel like giving up. As a pastor and Bible teacher, this is a scene that repeats over and over in my office,

through the telephone, via email and even on Facebook. When having to deal with such discouragement, all I can ever do is direct my colleagues to passages like this one and remind them that God is on our side and he will help us. The same is true for every person of faith; God is on our side always.

Isaiah 52:13-53:12 The Fourth Servant Poem: The Sacrificial Mission of Yahweh's Servant

The fourth Servant Poem is arguably one of the most cited and admired passages from the book. For all intents and purposes, here Yahweh speaks about the work his Servant will perform, through personal self-sacrifice, on behalf of humanity.

The final Servant Poem portrays the Servant as follows: (1) the Servant will be the cause of bewilderment (52:13-15); (2) the bewilderment deepens via a question and its answer (53:1-3); (3) the work (53:4-6) and experience (53:7-9) of the Servant is described; (4) reasons are provided for the Servant's suffering (53:10-11); and (5) the Servant receives his reward (53:12).

The fourth Servant Poem opens with 'Look my Servant shall prosper' ('act wisely' ESV, HCSB, NIV; 'shall deal prudently' NKJV; 'will succeed' The NET Bible). The prosperity of the Servant is augmented by a rapid sequence of three synonymous verbs punctuated with the adverb 'very'. All three verbs describe the elevating of the Servant to the highest position of honour, he will be 'raised, lifted up and exalted greatly' (vs 13). Despite this elevation, the Servant is the object of human astonishment because what they see is someone marred beyond human resemblance (vs 14):

- (a) from man
- (b) his appearance
- (b) and his form
- (a) from sons of man ('adam).

The chiasm puts together two synonyms for 'appearance-form' and also two words for humanity, 'man-man', both of which are collective singular. Consequently, the Servant 'shall startle many nations' and even kings will be speechless before him. The meaning of the Hebrew root word 'startle' is uncertain. The JPS reading adopted here parallels the speechlessness of the kings. The cause of this astonishment lies in their having to come to terms with things beyond comprehension.

For what has not been told to them, they shall see and what they have not heard, they shall understand (vs 15).

It is unclear if the response is negative or positive. The precise meaning of vs 15 is ambiguous at best. Perhaps the nations are horrified by what they see or are stunned by the Servant's might.

The first 'Who?' question of the Poem is interjected at this juncture to draw further attention to the ensuing mystery surrounding the servant. 'Who has believed what we have heard? To whom has the arm of Yahweh been revealed?' The unbelief of Israel (vs 1; also 6:9-10; 7:9; 29:9-10; 42:18-19; 43:8; 48:4-8; 56:10) but one that will be reversed (29:18; 32:3-4; 35:5; 42:7, 16) is a recurring motif in the book of Isaiah. The next verse describes the incognito nature of the Servant's upbringing. 'For he grew up like a young plant . . . like a root from dry ground'. The imagery suggests complete insignificance. He possesses neither form, splendour/majesty nor beauty to entice humanity (vs 2; also 52:14). To the contrary, he is 'despised and rejected', 'a man full of sorrow and grief' (lit. 'disease'), and with no standing before the peoples of the world (vs 3). It comes as no surprise that no one would believe such a report.

The experience of the Servant is described in greater detail in the following verses. The work of the Servant is substitutionary both in form and actuality. By way of contrast, vss 4-6 present the sacrifice of the Servant in the face of human misunderstanding and rejection. 'Surely he has carried our griefs (lit. 'diseases') and our pains' but we consider him a victim of God's justice, 'stricken, smitten by God and afflicted' (vs 4). We are like straying sheep, turning every which way wilfully, 'but Yahweh has punished him for our guilt' (vs 6; also Lev 16:21-22; 2 Cor 5:21; 1 Pet 2:25). We are the reason for his suffering: 'He was wounded for our rebellions, crushed for our guilt; the punishment for our peace upon him, and with his stripes we are healed' (vs 5). That his suffering is our fault compounds our incomprehension (vs 4) of the Servant's work which comprises four elements: (1) the Servant suffers alone; (2) he acts in substitution; (3) he deals with every aspect of human need; and (4) his sacrificial work fulfils the will of God.

The Servant is depicted as accomplishing his task without complaint (vss 7-9). He is persecuted and led to slaughter like a lamb but 'he did not open his mouth' (vs 7; John 1:29, 36; Acts 8:32-33; 1 Pet 2:22-23). This fact is stated twice and portrays the Servant as a dignified sacrifice, faithfully submitting to divine will, neither complaining nor wailing, even in the face of injustice (vs 8). The people who witnessed these events, his own generation, had no clue to what was happening. Another 'Who?' question is posed: 'Who thought (considered) [this]? He is cut off from the land of the living, from rebellion of my people (a Qumran scroll reads 'his people' and fits the context better) a stroke to him' (vs 8). The verse clearly depicts the death of the Servant so that his people could continue with life. His death and burial are pictured in contrasting terms, as a criminal (with the wicked) and as a wealthy man (vs 9). The unit ends with a simple statement, 'he has done no violence and [there was] no deceit in his mouth'. The Servant is neither violent nor deceptive but yet he suffers.

Therefore, all this begs a question, 'Why does the Servant have to suffer in this manner?' The Servant's suffering and death had to do with Yahweh's will. God 'willed' his suffering and grief and in his hands 'Yahweh's will' is accomplished (vs 10). The reference to divine will forms an inclusio in the verse. The Servant became the 'restitution offering' or guilt offering (see Lev 5:14-19) for the sins of humanity. Therefore, divine purpose dictates the Servant's vicarious suffering (see Luke 24:26; Acts 2:23; 4:27-28), yet the Servant performs his mission with clarity of vision and satisfaction of soul (vs 11):

- (a) from pain of his soul
 - (b) he shall see
 - (b) he shall be satisfied
- (a) by his knowledge

This satisfaction assures the Servant that his sacrifice ensures 'many are accounted righteous' (lit. 'my servant, righteous one, will make many righteous'; [see 10:30; 23:12; 28:21; Ps 93:4]). The term 'many' comprises two principal meanings, 'much/many' and 'great'. It occurs five times in this Poem (52:14, 15; 53:11, 12 [2x]) and in all instances it connotes 'many'. It is also a theological term within the Poem referring to all those who benefit from the Servant's work. The Servant's sacrifice eventually receives its just reward of glory and eternal blessing (vs 12). God says,

- Therefore
- (a) I will divide for him
 - (b) with many
 - (b) with strong ones
 - (a) he shall divide spoils

The blessing is a reasonable one

because

- (a) he poured out
- (b) to death his soul
- (b) and with rebels
- (a) he was numbered

Furthermore, 'he carried the sins of many and made intercession for rebels'. The use of the three primary sin words in this Poem underscores the substitutionary nature of the Servant's sacrifice and assures sinners that all sins are within the purview of his sacrifice.

Arguably, the fourth Servant Poem has been the heartbeat of the Christian doctrine of substitutionary atonement. The passage does not paint a pretty picture of a conquering Servant who accomplishes his mission with pomp and pageantry. Almost catching the reader by surprise, we discover that the Servant accomplishes his work by a rather unconventional method, the sacrifice of himself. The use of this method causes consternation among observers to the point it seems inconceivable that the salvation of the world could be accomplished this way. Yet this is precisely God's way and therefore the Servant's path. To put this in simpler terms: his life for ours; his blood for ours; his pain for ours; and his victory and reward as ours.

The importance of this Poem to Christian theology, music and art underlines the fact that the basic lesson of salvation is sacrifice. But we may contend that this is not really intended for us as we are the beneficiaries of such sacrifice. I would like to suggest that sacrifice is the embodiment of God within us, the hallmark of a saved-life. A line from a well-known song says, 'On my very best day, I'm just a sinner saved by grace'. That grace is made possible through the sacrifice of Jesus but is demonstrated in the sacrifice with which we live our lives.

BROKEN BARRIERS

Isaiah 56-59

The final part of Isaiah's second segment, chapters 56-59, is like a reprise in a great symphony. On the one hand, there is replay of former themes which are closely intertwined to each other. On the other hand, there is a distinct crescendo of new themes. The new realities begin to form in these chapters but would not reach full fruition until chapters 65-66. Nevertheless, we can see the shape of things to come as God rolls back the curtain so we may catch a glimpse of the radical transformation the Servant has produced.

This lengthy passage begins with 'this is what Yahweh says' in 56:1 and concludes with 'Yahweh declares' in 59:20. Verse 21 is transitional and serves as a spring board for the subsequent unit. The passage discusses the nature of true religion, contains denunciations of false religions and religious leaders and asserts that Israel finds safety only in God's leadership.

The messenger formula, 'this is what Yahweh says', launches this long section of Isaiah and is repeated in vs 4. The formula is followed by two command clauses, 'keep justice and do righteousness'. The reason for the command is expressed in these phrases: 'for soon' God's salvation 'will come' and his 'deliverance be revealed' (vs 1). 'Be revealed' is a summary of the promises in the book of Isaiah (see 1:21, 27; 5:7, 16; 9:7; 16:5; 28:17; 32:1, 16; 33:5; 45:8; 46:13; 51:5-8). With this in mind, 'blessed' is the person (Ps 1:1) who follows the command, 'who keeps Sabbath' by not profaning it and 'keeps his hands from anything evil' (vs 2).

The Sabbath is a dominant motif in this section of the book but is mentioned elsewhere only in chapters 1 and 66. The Sabbath is a sign of loyalty to the covenant with God (see Exod 31:13-17; Ezek 20:18-20) and its observance is the hallmark of true worship (contrast with 1:11-15). It is a prominent symbol of the future salvation and new reality God offers. Sabbath and justice are also closely linked since Sabbath is a sign of the completeness of life before God to whom justice greatly matters. The text connects Sabbath and salvation (see Exod 31:13-17; Ezek 20:12-20) and paints this reality on an eschatological canvass. So significant is this command that even foreigners (60:10; 61:5; 62: 8) who have joined themselves to Yahweh are urged not to belittle their standing before God. They should not say that 'Yahweh will surely separate me from his people'. The opening of Sabbath to everyone anticipates an order of life not yet available. The syntax emphasises the sense of rejection that such people feel. The restrictions of Exod 12:43, 45 and Deut 23:1 no longer apply. The Eunuch (39:7) should also not say that he is a withered tree (vs 3). Foreigner and Eunuch are Isaiah's code for the disenfranchised, those who appear outside or are not invited to participate in the covenant. The reversal of fortune that is being presented has a decidedly universal sense about it.

A second 'this is what Yahweh says' presents God's promise to these disenfranchised people (vss 4-5). The Eunuchs 'who keep the Sabbath, choose the things that please' God and are committed to the covenant, will receive these blessings:

- (1) They will be made monuments in God's house or temple (2 Sam 18:18)
- (2) Their status will be even better than simply sons and daughters
- (3) An eternal name which 'will not be cut off' (vs 5). The imagery of 'cut' is a reminder of their own plight as Eunuchs and the 'cutting' of covenant.

God's promised blessing cannot be forfeited and is truly universal.

A similar destiny awaits the foreigners 'who join themselves to Yahweh, to minister to him, to love the name of Yahweh, and to be his servants' (vs 6). That foreigners could be servants of Yahweh

rings new bells into the message of Isaiah. Like the Eunuchs, these people also 'keep the Sabbath' and are loyal to the covenant. Their behaviour is an expression of their loyalty; they are on God's side. Their rewards are:

- (1) presence in Yahweh's holy mountain;
- (2) rejoicing in his house of prayer; and
- (3) accepted sacrifices (vs 7).

The language clearly echoes temple imagery through the triple depiction of 'my holy mountain, my house of prayer and my altar'. God punctuates these promises with 'my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples' (see 2:2-3; 25:6-8; 1 Kgs 8:41-43; Mark 11:17).

The 'declaration of lord Yahweh' (see 1:24; 22:25; 49:18) pertains to the great gathering of Israel and all those who come to covenant with Yahweh. The word 'to gather' occurs three times in vs 8: '*gathering* of Israel's outcasts, yet I will *gather* to him those being *gathered* to him' (also Jer 49:5). The three occurrences of the same word provide emphasis to the task of gathering all those who at the moment appear outside the covenant (a theme running throughout this section).

Yahweh's condemnation of Israel's unfaithful leaders underpins this unit. In direct contrast to the escalating fortunes of the 'outcasts', Israel's leaders are doomed to divine judgement. An invitation is given to nature's predators (symbols of enemy nations; Jer 12:7-9) to feast (vs 9) with insatiable appetite (vs 11). The judgement to fall on the leaders will be a terrible one indeed. There are two classes of leaders mentioned, watchmen (vs10) and shepherds (vss 11b-12). 'Watchmen' refers to the prophets (also 21:6; 52:8; Jer 6:17; Ezek 3:17; 33:1-9; Hab 2:1) and their crime is that they are 'blind' and 'do not know'. They are compared to dogs which do not bark but love to simply dream, lie down and sleep. 'Shepherds' are the rulers of the nation (also Jer 25:34-35; Ezek 34:1-10) who have failed to emulate the divine Shepherd (40:10-11). Their crimes are 'they do not know understanding', they 'have turned to their own way', they are intent only on personal gain (vs 11) and they love to drink (5:11-12; 28:7-8). They live with a carefree attitude with no sense of future or destiny, saying, 'Tomorrow will be like today, only far better!' (vs 12). As watchmen, leaders should be alert to eternal dangers, and as shepherds, they should provide internal nurturing for God's people.

The portrait of these watchmen-shepherds continues with some damning words in chapter 57. Verse 1 contains an inclusio formed by the word 'righteous', 'the righteous perish . . . is taken away the righteous', which pictures the plight of the ignored righteous. Yet, ironically it is the righteous who 'will enter into peace' (2 Kgs 22:20; Rev 14:13) and 'rest on their bed' (vs 2). 'Bed' may refer to deathbed or grave; the idea is that the righteous will die peacefully.

Yahweh challenges those he calls 'sons of sorcerers' and 'seed of an adulterer and prostitute' (vs 3). The words 'adulterer' and 'prostitute' are probably a word pair and should be read as 'adulterous prostitute', an obvious redundancy. Yahweh's scathing and sarcastic challenge is hard to the ears.

- Against whom do you make sport (mock)?
- Against whom do you open wide mouth and stick out tongue?
- Is it not you who are children of rebellion, seed of deceit? (vs 4)

The affiliation with idolatrous religions drove them to 'burn with lust among the oaks' (1:29; 1 Kgs 14:23; 2 Kgs 16:4; Hos 4:13; Jer 3:6; Ezek 20:28) and 'slay children in valleys' (vs 5). 'Burn with lust' here is the only occurrence in the Hebrew Bible and its precise meaning is unclear but likely describes both the heat of fire (44:15) and animals in sexual heat (Gen 30:38). The religions that so

enamoured them were filled with sexual obscenities (ritual sex accompanied pagan fertility rites) and child sacrifice (Jer 2:20; 32:35).

The list of their sins continues unabated. Their 'portion' and 'lot' are the smooth stones to which they had brought 'drink offering' and 'grain offering' (vs 6; Gen 43-4; Lev 6:14ff.). They also ascended to the mountaintops to offer sacrifices (vs 7). They set up memorials behind doors and doorposts and made bargains with the gods they worshipped (vs 8); they made covenants with other gods even though they are Yahweh's covenant people. The depth of their spiritual decline is encapsulated in the phrase 'you love their beds and looked hand' (a euphemism for human genitals). Verse 9 captures their spiritual degradation with four verbal images:

You *journeyed* to the king with oil;
 You *multiplied* perfumes;
 You *sent* your envoys far away;
 You *sent down* to she'ol.

They spared no expense or effort as they ran after other gods and attempted to make political alliances with foreign powers (30:1-17; 31:1-9). Even the burden of the journey did not deter them; they did not say, 'I give up', or succumb to tiredness (vs 10).

God asks, 'Who do you dread and fear that . . . you do not fear me?' and, how was it possible for them not to remember or take him to heart (vs 11)? So he declares, 'your righteousness and your works will not help you' (vs 12). With heavy irony Yahweh tells them to cry out to their idol collection for deliverance but also to remember that 'all of them, wind will carry them away and breath will take them' (vs 13). The gods they so eagerly run after are as unreliable as the wind, but those who take refuge in God 'shall possess the earth and inherit' God's holy mountain, a symbol of his kingdom (11:9).

A pattern employed in chapters 51-52 reappears in vs 14; two imperatives are followed by two imperatival clauses, 'build up, build up says God, prepare a way, remove obstruction from my people's way' (62:10). The next two verses give reasons for this command.

For the High and Exalted One (6:1; 52:13), who lives forever, and whose name is holy says, 'I live in a high and holy place and with the humble and humble of spirit; to revive the spirit of the humble and to revive the heart of the humble' (vs 15).

The verse is characterised by word repetition and word pairs and the two words about the 'humble' could be read in an emphatic manner as 'truly humble'. The truly transcendent God is also truly immanent and even though he lives in the highest abodes, he also dwells with his people. God states his intention not to be angry or accusing forever because that would shrivel up the spirit/breath of life that he himself had made (vs 16). The human heart can take only so much discipline and God know this (1 Pet 5:10).

Because the people walk in their own way and live greedy lives, God says 'he was angry, he struck them, he hid [his face], and he was angry' (vs 17). The collective singular is used throughout this description and the word 'to be angry' is used twice to highlight the anger of God. Even though God has seen the evil ways of his people, he still intends to heal, lead and comfort them (vs 18; also 40:1). Yahweh says, '*shalom shalom*', to those who are far and near (vs 19; Eph 2:11-12).

Chapter 57 ends with another reminder of the fate of the wicked who are ‘like a storm-tossed sea’ which continually churns up dirt and muck (vs 20; cf. 48:22; Jude 12-13). Even worse, there can be no *shalom* for the wicked (vs 21); their fate is in God’s hands.

Chapter 58 opens with four commands: ‘cry aloud, do not spare the trumpet, lift up your voice and declare’. What is the point of all this ruckus? ‘Declare to my people their rebellion and to the house of Jacob their sin’, says God. Sin among God’s people is the preoccupation of the chapter. Verse 2 relates the actions of Israel with such subtle facetiousness that it is possible to miss the fact that God is speaking tongue-in-cheek.

Daily (lit, ‘day day’) they seek me;
 they *delight* to know my ways;
 like a nation who does righteousness and
 do not forsake the justice of their God.
 They ask me for righteous judgements;
 they *delight* in God’s nearness.

On the surface this appears to be wonderful affirmation; their religious practice seems praiseworthy. However, the underlying tone is laced with irony, almost with the sense of ‘as if’, a fact made clear in vs 3-4.

The voice now belongs to the people who ask, ‘Why have we fasted but you do not see; we have humbled ourselves but you do not know?’ The accusation receives an instant riposte: ‘Look! On the day of fasting you seek pleasure and oppress all your workers (vs 3). Look! To quarrel and fight you fast, but strikes with wicked fist you do not fast (vs 4)’. The communal fast days during Isaiah’s time were impressive, solemn occasions. Outwardly this was rather eye-catching but harboured the impression of extreme piety far removed from actual reality. The verse appears to say that religious behaviour without curbing violence is of no regard. It is meaningless to raise their voice as if God would hear above the din of their sin.

Through a series of rhetorical questions, Yahweh poses the following:

Is this the fast I choose, a day for a person to humble himself?
 Is it to bow down like a reed and spread sackcloth over his head?
 Is this what you call fast, a day acceptable to Yahweh? (vs 5).

The people seem to think that religious performance is what God is calling for and so as long as they keep the fast days, they are on the right track. But this is not the case at all. The rhetoric continues in vs 6-7:

Is this not the fast I choose, to break the bonds of wickedness, to untie the ropes of the yoke, to set the oppressed free, to break every yoke?
 Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to bring the homeless poor into your house; to cover when you see the naked and not to hide yourself from your flesh (probably referring to family needs)?

The answer is self-evident, God puts greater weight on how his people treat others (like the unwanted foreigners and Eunuchs) than he does ritual actions (1:10-23; Mic 6:1-8; Amos 4:1-5; Matt 25:31-46; Jas 1:26-27; 2:14-17). They should have known that a true fast includes sharing food with the hungry (Deut 14:28-29; 15:7-11; Est 9:20-22; Job 22:7; Prov 22:9; Ezek 18:7, 16).

The rest of chapter 58 follows the ‘if . . . then’ or ‘then . . . if’ (cause-effect) patterns to underscore the reciprocal nature of genuine spirituality. Verses 8 and 9 contain two statements beginning with ‘then’.

Then

- (a) shall break out
- (b) like dawn your light (also 9:1-2)
- (b) and your healing
- (a) shall spring up speedily

and

- (x) shall walk before you
- (y) your righteousness
- (y) glory of Yahweh
- (x) shall be your rear guard (vs 8; also Exod 13:21; 14:19-20).

The imagery in the double chiasm, alluding to the Exodus narrative, is of a God ensuring swift success for (embedded in the first chiasm) and surrounding his people (pictured in the second chiasm). ‘Then you shall call and Yahweh will answer, you shall cry and he will say ‘Here I am’’ (vs 9; 65:1). The assurance of instant connection with God is truly wonderful. However, such connection is conditional upon human action, the very ones spelled out earlier in vss 6-7.

‘If you remove from among you the yoke, to point finger (with false accusation or gossip; also Prov 6:12-15), to speak wickedness’ and

‘If (implied)

- (a) you pour out
- (b) for the hungry yourself
- (b) needs of the afflicted
- (a) you satisfy

Then shall rise your light in the darkness and your gloom as noonday (vss 9-10).

The chiasm reveals that meeting the needs of the less fortunate is a prerequisite to blessing.

The promise of continual guidance is then made (vs 11). This is a God who

- (a) will satisfy . . .
- (b) your desire
- (b) your bones
- (a) he will strengthen

God’s blessings impact every facet of human life with ‘soul’ and ‘bone’ (see 66:14; Jer 23:9; Pss 6:2; 32:3; Prov 15:30) forming a merism of human existence. God’s people will become like a garden whose waters never run dry (vs 11). The rebuilding of the nation is painted in graphic terms (vs 12).

- (a) they shall build from you
- (b) ancient ruins
- (b) foundations of generations
- (a) they shall rise up

The picturesque manner of this rebuilding (ruins coming back to life as if from the dead) produces a new title for God’s people, ‘repairer of breach and restorer of streets’. Nevertheless, such glorious

destiny still hinges on Israel's compliance with God's expectation as the last two verses of chapter 58 demonstrate.

The final 'if' and 'then' discussion in chapter 58 pertains exclusively to the Sabbath (56:1-8).

If you turn from the Sabbath your feet, doing your pleasure in my holy day;
 If you call the Sabbath, 'Delight', the holy of Yahweh, 'Honourable';
 If you honour it from doing your way, from finding your pleasure and talking talk . . .

These lines present the conditions God has set out: (1) they must refrain from seeking personal pleasure on the Sabbath, implying that it is God's pleasure they should seek; (2) they should change their attitude towards the Sabbath by giving it new names, Delight and Honourable; (3) they should not go their own way, implying that God's way should be their path; and (4) they should not 'talk talk' (lit. 'speak words'). The phrase 'talk talk' may imply chit chat (Deut 18:20), business discussion, angry words and gossip. It is also possible to see this as the way they justified their oppressive conduct towards their workers (vs 3 and 59:3-4).

'Then' spells out the results of meeting the conditions stated above:

- (1) you shall delight in Yahweh (Ps 37:4);
- (2) I will make you ride on the heights of the earth (33:16; Deut 26:16-19; 28:1; 32:13; 33:29);
and
- (3) I will feed you the inheritance of Jacob your father.

The change from second to first person is unexpected but does not affect the basic message as this comes from God; 'for the mouth of Yahweh has spoken'. The preceding promises will become reality because God guarantees it. The 'cause-effect' construction of vss 13-14 bears a definite tone, blessing is a consequence of observing Sabbath. Isaiah describes the temporal and eternal rewards of observing Sabbath. The call for true Sabbath-keeping, like the call for true fasting is a call for change of heart and life; there is no shortcut to following God.

By reprising words and phrases, chapter 58 places Yahweh's point of view at odds with human perspective: my ways (vs 2) as opposed to your ways (vs 13) and 'that which I delight' (vs 4) against 'that in which you delight' (vs 13). God's way is the only corrective to pious but heartless religiosity.

The question in 58:3 is answered tartly in 59:1, 'Look! Yahweh's hand is not short from saving, his ear is not dull from hearing'. The complaint is dismissed as invalid because it is sin which creates a separation from God (Heb 12:5-11; Jas 4:1-10) and produces the illusion that he does not listen (vs 2). The sin words here do not include the most serious level of sin even though the idea is prominent in the preceding chapters.

The sins which separate God from his people are not religious but social in nature. Four body parts in two pairs (hands and fingers, lips and tongues) are employed to demonstrate the callousness of Israel's existence (see Paul's similar description in Rom 3:15-17). Hands 'are defiled with blood and fingers with guilt; lips speak lies and tongues mutter wickedness' (vs 3). 'Mutter' may refer to unintelligible sounds instead of meditative words (Ps 1:2). Sin is such a natural reflex for them to the extent that 'they conceive mischief and give birth to iniquity' (vs 4). They are as dangerous as adders or vipers and spiders (vs 5). Their sinfulness is compared to spider webbing and body parts (hands, feet) are again used to picture their condition:

- (a) their works
- (b) works of guilt
- (b) violent deeds
- (a) in their hands;
- (x) their feet
- (y) run to evil
- (y) they rush
- (x) to shed innocent blood;
- and also their thoughts, thoughts of guilt (vs 7).

The two clauses, ‘their works, works of guilt’ and ‘their thought, thoughts of guilt’ employ identical syntax and summarise the depth of the people’s perversion; thought and action have achieved synchronicity in sin. The absence of peace and justice requires great caution from those who follow their crooked path for ‘no one who walks on them will know peace’ (vs 8). The inclusio of ‘shalom they do not know’ and ‘he does not know shalom’ in vs 8 is a reminder that this message contains both judgement and warning.

The conclusion, ‘therefore’, is quickly drawn with an assertion that justice and righteousness are in absentia. In their absence ‘(a) we will look for light (b) but, look, darkness (b) for brightness (a) in gloom we will walk’ (vs 9). The parallel of two word-pairs (justice-righteousness and darkness-gloom) paints a dark picture of the spiritual condition of God’s people. The condition is compounded with further descriptions: ‘groping for walls like the blind, stumbling at noon as if it was night time’ (vs 10), ‘growling like bears or moaning like doves’ (vs 11). Blindness is a metaphor for their inability to discern the will of God or follow his instructions (see 6:9-10; 29:9; 42:18-19; 43:8; 56:10). The depiction of helplessness and anguish which is the result of sin compels the prophet (whose voice is heard in these verses) to wonder about deliverance. ‘We wait for justice but there is none, for salvation but it is far from us’ (vs 11; also vss 9, 14).

The reason for this despair is all too apparent.

- For
- (a) have multiplied before you
- (b) our rebellions
- (b) and our sins
- (a) testify against us.
- For our rebellions are with us and our guilt we know (vs 12)

Verse 13 compounds the nature of Israel’s sins with these infinitives: rebelling, denying, turning, speaking and conceiving (all referring to sinful acts). The verse even contains a rare double infinitive, ‘conceiving-conceiving’, whose sound rhyme in Hebrew produces a sense of horror. In a way similar to David’s great confession (Ps 51), the prophet expresses the collective culpability of Israel and, as in the psalm, the three primary sin words are used. Sin constitutes a missing of the mark, a deliberate relational act and rebellion against God’s authority. Acknowledging this fact is a prerequisite to salvation.

The harshest consequences of sin are the distancing of justice and righteousness (vs 14) and the absence of truth (vs 15). However, the most tragic consequence is that ‘he who departs from evil makes himself a prey’. The predatory nature of sin often places God’s true people in mortal danger (1 Pet 5:8-9; 2 Pet 3:3-4; Rev 12:1-6).

This state of affairs is not only noticed by God (vs 15) but it drives him to action. Since there is no one to intervene, Yahweh takes matters into his own hands (vs 16). Verses 15b-16 utilise 'for there is no' three times to explain why Yahweh takes action: there is no justice; there is no man; and there is no intervening. Verse 17 describes the armour of Yahweh (Eph 6:11-17) like a warrior who goes into battle (11:5; 42:13; 63:1-6). 'He wears righteousness as breastplate and helmet of salvation on his head; he wears garments of vengeance (contrast with 61:10 'garments of triumph') as clothing and wrapped himself with fury as a cloak'. He is ready for truly frightening action against his sinning people.

The payback for sin is proportionate to human sinful action (vs 19). The verb 'repay' (used twice) is derived from the same root for *shalom*, and is in intensive mode. The word 'retribution' is also used twice and accompanies 'repay'. Twice God states his intention to 'repay' with 'retribution'. This is as emphatic a statement of divine judgement as may be found anywhere in the Bible. Nevertheless, all is not lost because all humanity will learn to fear Yahweh's name (vs 19; Duet 28:58; Neh 1:11; Pss 61:5; 86:11; 102:15; Mal 1:11; 4:2; 2 Chron 6:33) and a 'redeemer will come from Zion' (vs 20; 41:14; 59:18; Rom 11:26-27). God himself declares this.

The chapter reaches its apex with divine authentication: 'This is my covenant with them' (the expression is found again only in Ezek 16:8; 37:26).

'My Spirit that is upon you (42:1; 61:1), and my words that I have put in your mouth (51:16; Deut 18:18), shall not depart out of your mouth, or out of the mouth of your offspring, or out of the mouth of your children's offspring, from this time forth and forevermore' (vs 21; 54:10).

When all is said and done, God's new covenant (Isa 56-58) cannot be abrogated or undermined; it will stand the test of time. The fulfilment of this promise concerns the Servant or messiah and will be further delineated in chapter 61.

A principal feature of Israel's religion was its sense of exclusivity. Whether this was part of divine intention or simply the outworking of covenantal theology is difficult to assess. However, Isaiah draws aside the curtains to reveal God's true intention: that the exclusivity of Israel's religiosity is not what he had in mind. To redraw the lines of this new comprehension, God describes not only the nature of true religiosity but its inclusiveness. To accomplish this, he speaks of the inclusion of persons (foreigners and eunuchs) who had been previously excluded from the worship and covenant of Israel. Ultimately, God's house must become 'a house of prayer for all peoples' (56:7). In saying this, the new age of the messiah is being anticipated, an age of total inclusivity and equity for all.

Isaiah 56-59 is echoed in the NT, particularly in Pauline writings, where equality in Christ is foundational to understanding the salvation which liberates people from the grip of separation (a symbol of sin). In Paul's extended discussion of Christian equality (see Gal 3 and 4), we encounter the fulfilment of Isaianic prophecy in these words, 'for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. . . . There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus' (Gal 3:26, 28). Isaiah would say, 'There is neither eunuch nor foreigner, for we are all Israel'. The challenge for the Church is to ensure that in our doctrines, policies and traditions we do not relapse into the previous paradigm.

LIGHT OF GLORY

Isaiah 60-62

Isaiah 60 provides a counter to the previous chapter and the gloom of chapter 59 is replaced by resplendent light in chapter 60. A double imperative, 'arise, shine', addresses Zion (vs 1; also 59:20; 60:14) and sets the section in motion. However, unlike previous such occurrences (40:1; 51:9; etc.), two different but synonymous verbs are used. The command is followed by

'For

- (a) has come
- (b) your light (also 58:8, 10)
- (b) and Yahweh's glory (40:5)
- (a) upon you rises'

The chiasm equates light with Yahweh's glory. Isaiah is the only prophet who uses 'light' to a great extent with only a few occurrences in other prophets (Jer 13:16; Hos 6:5; Amos 5:18, 20; Mic 7:8-9). 'For look darkness covers the earth, thick darkness the peoples' (vs 2). The article attached to 'darkness' suggests a degree of particularity of this darkness in contrasts to the light. 'Yahweh rises over you and his glory will be seen over you', a clear distinction between those who belong to God and those who do not (see Exod 8:22, 23; Rev 21:10-11). The accompanying promise is that 'nations' and 'kings' will come to Israel's light and the brightness of its rising. The verb 'to rise' appears three times (once in each verse). In vs 1, Yahweh's glory 'rises'; in vs 2, Yahweh 'rises'; and in vs 3, Israel's brightness 'rises'. The transition from God's glory to Israel's glory indicates a major paradigm shift in this chapter.

Verse 4 comprises a sandwich made up of two imperatives, '*lift up* your eyes all around and *see*'. The sight to behold is the great gathering of Israel (see 43:5-7; 49:18; 54:1-8; 66:18-23). Their sons will come from far away and their daughters will be carried in arms or hips (vs 4). The result of this is voiced in four verbs (two synonymous pairs), 'you shall see, you shall be radiant; you shall thrill, you shall rejoice' (vs 5). Perhaps 'throb and thrill' captures the Hebrew word play better. The reason is because

- (a) shall be turned to you
- (b) the abundance of the sea
- (b) the wealth of nations (vs 11; 18:7; 60:6-7, 8-9)
- (a) shall come to you (vs 5).

The chiasm parallels 'abundance of the sea' with 'wealth of nations'. One group brings the wealth of nations, come in camel loads and come from Midian (Judg 6:1), Ephah and Sheba (Abraham's descendants by Keturah; Gen 25:1-4). They bring gold and frankincense (vs 5; Matt 2:11; Rev 21:24-26) but also 'proclaim the praises of Yahweh' (vs 6; also 63:7; Ps 102:16, 22). Another group comes from Kedar (Ishmael's second son; Gen 25:13) and Nebaioth (most likely Nabateans) and brings flocks of goats and sheep (vs 7). All the nations mentioned here represent Israel's neighbours of the Transjordan and Arabian Peninsula. While camels are beasts of burden, goats and sheep are sacrificial animals. They come to Yahweh's altar and glorious house which God glorifies. The names of nations assembled create a sense of nations surging to Zion. This new-found wealth of Israel is not just about material prosperity, it also includes spiritual well-being, while the nations who come bring material and spiritual gifts.

The surprised observers ask, 'Who are these?' The movement of these gift bearers is compared to clouds and doves (vs 8). But there still is a need to wait for the arrival of sons from far away with

their gold and silver. They come in ships all the way from Tarshish (2:16; 23:1), the farthest known place from the land of Israel (vs 9). The acceptance implicit in vs 7 is ratified in vs 9 where Yahweh, Israel's God and Holy One, glorifies his people.

The next two verses picture how foreigners will build Zion's walls (Neh 2:7-8; Acts 15:12-16) and kings will minister to her people (vs 10). Israel's punishment came in a moment of divine anger but her restoration is an act of his favour and mercy (vs 10). In the absence of war and with no prospect of plunder by thieves (2:4; 26:1-4; 33:20-22; Zec 2:4-5), Zion's gates shall be opened all the time, continually, day and night (62:6), so that the wealth of nations (vs 9) and procession of kings may not end (vs 11).

What follows next is a sobering verdict against unwilling nations. 'For the nation and kingdom that will not serve you shall perish . . . and be laid waste' (vs 12) because only in Zion can God's anger become compassion. The change of Israel's status is memorialised in two different pictures. First, the 'glory of Lebanon' and its luxuriant timber are brought to beautify God's sanctuary and glorify it. The word 'glory' forms an inclusio for vs 13 and alludes back to Solomon's temple. Second, the sons of Israel's oppressors shall come and pay homage to Zion and call her 'the city of Yahweh, the Zion of the Holy One of Israel' (vs 14). There is a complete reversal of roles and status for Israel.

Whereas Israel had been forsaken, hated and unable to move, God makes a new promise, 'I will make you majestic forever and a joy for generations (lit. 'generation and generation')' (vs 15). The imagery of 'sucking the milk of nations and the breasts of kings' speaks of the loving and personal care and nourishment and depicts the growing prosperity of Israel and the service these nations and kings will offer Zion (vs 10). God's purpose in doing this is for his people to know that 'I am Yahweh your Saviour and your Redeemer, the Mighty One of Jacob' (vs 16). The dual designation of Saviour and Redeemer stresses the salvific work of Yahweh, while the reference to Mighty One of Jacob speaks to his special relationship with their progenitor.

Verse 17 is characterised by four reversals:

Instead of bronze I will bring gold (1 Kgs 10:21, 27);
 Instead of iron I will bring silver;
 Instead of wood, bronze;
 Instead of stones, iron.

The first pairing describes reversal from something less valuable (bronze and iron) to something far more valuable (gold and silver), while the second pairing describes reversal from something softer (wood and stone) to something more durable (bronze and iron). Evoking memories of how harsh life had been during the Egyptian slavery and Babylonian exile, God says he will make *shalom* (well-being) and righteousness their new overseers and taskmasters (vs 17). Not only will the new reality usher in an era of equality, it will also bring great security. Violence and destruction will be absent from Israel's land and territory and they can give new names to their walls and gates, 'Salvation' and 'Praise' respectively (vs 18 contra 5:7). Life will be marked by tranquility and prosperity and yet there is more.

There will be new phenomena to experience. Instead of sun in the day and moon at night, 'Yahweh will be your eternal light and your God your glory' (vs 19; also vss 7, 9; Rev 22:4-5). The proximity of motif between this verse and the Revelation text suggests a strong eschatological undercurrent in these promises. The second reference to sun and moon ends with 'for Yahweh will be your eternal light' (vs 20). 'Eternal light' occurs in both vss 19 and 20 and describes not only what may be a

natural phenomenon but also a spiritual one as evidenced by the final statement in vs 20: ‘your days of mourning have ended’.

The litany of promises culminates in statements about a permanent change in the life of God’s people. ‘All of your people will be righteous (forever) they shall possess the land’ (vs 21). The positioning of ‘forever’ enables it to qualify both clauses, they will be righteous forever and they will possess the land forever. ‘The least shall become a clan and the smallest a mighty nation’. This is all the work of Yahweh who states, ‘I, Yahweh will hasten it in its time’ (vs 22). Perhaps Yahweh intends to hasten the fortunes of and enjoy Zion.

Chapter 61 echoes the voice of the messianic Servant (48:16) whose work is to create a new people and is empowered by the Spirit (11:2; 59:21). The appearance of ‘Lord Yahweh’ in vss 1 and 11 provides a literary inclusio to the passage.

The speaker in this poem could be the messianic Servant, the prophet or even Zion herself. However, echoes of the Servant Poems (42:1-4, 7; 49:2, 9; 50:4; cf. 51:16) strongly support the conclusion that the messianic Servant, the anointed one, is the speaker. It may be possible to view this as the fifth Servant Poem in the book of Isaiah. The authority of the Servant is encapsulated in three statements in vs 1, ‘the Spirit of Lord Yahweh is on me’ (11:1; 42:1), ‘Yahweh has anointed me’ and ‘he has sent me’.

The first three verses set out the working agenda of the Servant with the help of seven purpose clauses:

- (1) to bring good news to the afflicted or poor (11:4; 29:19; Matt 5:3);
- (2) to heal (lit. ‘bind up’) the broken-hearted;
- (3) to proclaim liberty (Lev 25:10) to captives and opening of freedom (a technical reference to the year of Jubilee; see Lev 25:10; Isa 49:8) to prisoners;
- (4) to proclaim the year of Yahweh’s favour (a new era of blessing; 34:8; 63:4; 2 Cor 6:2; a phrase corresponding to ‘the day of salvation’ in 49:8 and ‘the year of my redemption’ in 63:4), the day of our God’s vengeance (5:25-29; 63:1-6; Acts 17:31; Rev 6:15-17);
- (5) to comfort (40:1) all mourners;
- (6) to provide for the mourners of Zion; and
- (7) to give them glory instead of ashes.

The seven clauses are arranged in three pairs plus one: clauses 1 and 2 are joined by a finite verb; clauses 3 and 4 use the same infinitive; clauses 5 and 6 refer to mourners; and clause 7 contains a word play between glory and ashes. The final clause also contains additional reversal descriptors: ‘oil of joy instead of mourning; mantle of praise instead of spirit of fainting; and being called oaks of righteousness’ (cf. Ps 92:12-13) and ‘planting of Yahweh to glorify him’ (vs 3; also 60:21). The Servant’s mission is characterised by common semantic and ideological features.

The rebuilding of Zion is the focus of vss 4-5. The promise is they will rebuild the ancient and ruined cities (vs 4; also 54:3; 58:12), while strangers and foreigners will become their domestic help, tending their flock, farms and orchards (vs 5). The imagery is highly suggestive and assures God’s people of complete restoration.

Israel’s new status is further described in vss 6-7. The changed status is symbolised by new titles, ‘priests of Yahweh’ and ‘ministers of our God’ (vs 6; Exod 19:5-6; 1 Pet 2:9); God’s people finally fulfil their role. God’s people will enjoy the ‘wealth of nations’ (60:5, 11) and all their ‘riches’ (lit. ‘their

glory'). The crescendo of reversals reach a high point with promises that they will enjoy a 'double portion' (used twice) in place of their shame and joy instead of their dishonour.

'For I Yahweh love justice and hate robbery with burnt offering'. The speaker here is Yahweh who briefly returns to an earlier theme, his disgust with heartless religiosity (1:4ff.), and sets the tone for the next set of promises. The antithetical relationship of love-hate illuminates the idea that justice is demonstrated in the social arena. This is the last appearance of 'justice' in the book and God spells out his intention to 'faithfully reward' them and to make an 'eternal covenant' with them (vs 8; also 54:10). He also tells them that they and their posterity 'will be known among the nations' and everyone will recognise them as a people 'blessed by Yahweh' (vs 9). God himself, 'I Yahweh', is the guarantor of the promises (also 41:13; 42:6-8; 43:3, 15; 44:6, 24-28; 46:8-11; 48:17; 49:26; 51:12-16; 60:16).

The voice of the Servant resumes again in first person speech as in vs 1-3: 'I will rejoice in Yahweh; I will exult in my God' (vs 10; see the song of Hannah in 1 Sam 2:1-10 and the song of Mary in Luke 1:46-55). The wedding imagery in the second half of vs 10 provides a celebratory tone to the joy of the Servant (Eph 5:25-27; Rev 21:2, 9). The first reason for this joy compares 'clothes of salvation' and 'robe of righteousness' with the preparation of bride and bridegroom for their wedding, 'as a bridegroom decks with or wears turban' (Ezek 44:18) and 'as a bride adorns herself with her jewels'. The description for bridegroom involves a verbal root from which the word 'priest', *kohen*, is derived and the word for turban is used earlier in vs 3 for 'glory'. The comparison seems to be that the bridegroom's headdress is as glorious as the one worn by a priest.

The second reason for the joy employs an analogy from nature, stating that 'Lord Yahweh will cause righteousness and praise to sprout up before all the nations' (vs 11; also 45:25; Pss 35:28; 48:11; 119:164). Zion's local celebration becomes a universal experience.

Isaiah 62 is the third member of a trilogy of chapters which focus specifically on Zion, another name for Jerusalem, but used as symbol of God's kingdom.

The first two lines of the vs 1 are synonymous parallels both introduced by 'for the sake of':

for the sake of Zion I will not be silent
for the sake of Jerusalem I will not be quiet

The emphasis that God acts on behalf of his people is central to Isaiah's message. God offers a future based on the renewal and glory which he will bring upon his people (see 1:26; 2:2-3; 4:2-6; 9:1-3; 10:21-22; 11:11-16; 14:1-2; 25:1-9; 26:1-21; 29:22-24; 30:19-26; 32:1-4, 15-18; 33:5-6, 17-24; 35:1-10; 40:1-5, 27:31; 41:8-20; 42:6-7; 43:1-7, 16-21; 44:1-5, 21-28; 45:14-17, 24-25; 49:5-6, 8-26; 51:1-3, 11; 52:1-10; 54:1-17; 55:12-13; 57:15-19; 59:20; 60:1-22; 61:1-9; 65:8-10, 17-25; 66:10-14, 18-23). The chiasmic half of the verse augments this thought:

(a) until goes out
(b) as brightness
(c) her righteousness
(c) her salvation
(b) as a torch
(a) burns

Righteousness and salvation (61:10) are the reversals of life resulting in Zion becoming a light. God does not quit until this has happened.

The purpose of doing this is for the benefit of others; 'nations will see your righteousness and all kings your glory' (vs 2; 40:5; 49:7; 52:15; 58:8; 60:1-3, 10-11, 16). What others see finds a counterpart in a divine act of naming (vss 4, 12; Rev 3:12), signifying the reversals being promised. Naming is symptomatic of status change and this is what Yahweh decides; it is he who defines his people's destiny (vss 4, 12; 1:26; 56:5; 60:14, 18). Zion is the beneficiary of a new name.

Zion's destiny is indeed a glorious one because it is God who controls her destiny. 'You shall be a crown of beauty in Yahweh's hand and a diadem of royalty in the palm of your God' (vs 3; also 28:1-4). The beautiful description magnifies the statement of vs 2a, whereas vs 4 continues with the name change motif, reversing the conditions of 60:15 (6:12; 49:14). Instead of being called 'Forsaken' or 'Desolate', Zion will receive new names, 'Kheptsibah' (lit. 'my delight is in her') and 'B'ulah' (The text is the source for the English names Hepzibah and Beulah). These are names of endearment because 'Yahweh delights in you and your land will be married'. The play on words is captivating and the message is heart-warming. The second statement offers an analogy of the expected result of the promise (60:21-22). 'For as a young man marries a young woman, your sons will marry you; as the bridegroom rejoices over his bride, your God will rejoice over you' (vs 5). The verse points to the changing relationships between Yahweh, his people and the land spoken of in vs 5; a mutual love relationship emerges. Zion's new life is both a delight and a source of joy to God. It is also a source of joy for its people, its sons and daughters.

Furthermore, God (or the messiah) announces that he has set 'Watchmen' (probably the prophets; also 21:11; 56:10) on Zion's walls who will guard the city day and night and proclaim restoration continually (vs 6; cf. 56:10; 2 Sam 18:24; Ezek 3:17). The two expressions 'all day and all night' and 'continually' reflect the continuity and unbreakable nature of the watchmen's task. The two verses are joined by a play on the word 'rest'. At the end of vs 6 there is no rest for you (referring to Zion's people), while at the beginning of vs 7 there is no rest for him (probably referring to God; Ps 132:1-5). The verse calls Yahweh to accountability; he cannot rest until he has made Jerusalem 'praise on the earth'.

The promise of God takes on the form of a vow ('by his right hand, by his mighty arm') as God pronounces that their enemies shall not enjoy their grain nor foreigners their wine (vs 8). The certainty of this announcement is expressed through 'if' statements: 'if I should give' and 'if they should drink'. To the contrary, those who do the work 'shall eat and praise Yahweh' and those who labour 'shall drink in my holy courts' (vs 9). Israel's punishment was based on covenantal curses (Lev 26:14-39; Deut 28:15-68; Judg 6:1-6) but God's solemn oath reverses the curses.

Verse 10 reintroduces syntactical features which were employed earlier in the book, particularly in chapters 49-52. The 2+1 formula comprising a double imperative plus a third imperative (51:9, 17; 52:1, 11; 57:14) is used in 'go through . . . go through . . . prepare'. The beautiful sound rhyme pictorialises the act of getting through the gate and building a road for Zion's people (vs 10a). Another feature, double imperative followed by two imperatival clauses (see 57:14), makes up the second half of the verse. 'Build up . . . build up . . . clear it . . . lift up' (vs 10b). Again, the sound rhyme is designed to impress with its assonance and description of the work being effected; the building of a highway which is cleared of stones and raising of an emblem over the people (11:12; 49:22).

The chapter reaches its zenith with a triple exclamation (vs 11). 'Look! Yahweh proclaims . . . Look! Say to Zion's daughters . . . Look! His reward . . .' Israel's salvation is coming and God brings reward and recompense with him (48:20). The last two lines of vs 11 are identical to 40:10; both speak of 'reward' and 'recompense' which Yahweh brings. The invitation is extended to all of earth's citizens

also (also 11:9; 19:23-25; 56:3-8). The whole picture culminates in a litany of names for Zion forming a chiasmic pattern:

- (a) Holy People
- (b) Yahweh's Redeemed (also 35:9; 43:1, 14; 44:6; 51:10; 59:20; 60:16)
- (b) Cared For (or Sought Out)
- (a) City Not Forsaken (also vs 4)

The 'a' names describe what is permanently true, whereas the 'b' terms what God has done. The new names for God's people reflect the new names for God's Sabbath in 58:14. In both cases, change of status and reversal is of prime concern.

A brief look at Isaiah's theology is best encapsulated in the changing tone of God towards his people. In Isa 1 we hear God pronounce his disgust over the religious manipulation of Israel and his threats to punish them severely for their sin and mindlessness. However, by the time we reach Isa 40, the tone has changed to one of comfort and encouragement. The repulsive Zion of chapter 1 is the object of divine favour in chapter 40 and receives great sympathy from Yahweh. By Isa 60, the tone has completely turned around. Gone are the anger of chapter 1 and the pity of chapter 40. These are replaced by a promissory note that God's light will bathe his people in perpetual glory. This dramatic shift reveals that Zion (Israel, God's people) is the one undying object of Yahweh's *khesed*, covenantal love, and regardless of the sin, her elevation is the eternal design of God.

We should recognise that sin is abhorrent to God, especially when found among his people. However, God's heart for his people always rings true and his love cannot be held at bay even by sin. This is not to say that we are at liberty to sin willy nilly. To the contrary, the understanding of such love should lead us to an even deeper appreciation of how truly loved we are and motivate us away from sin. Such love is the true antidote for sin. When my daughter was young, it was my responsibility to punish her for wrongdoing. At the same time, it was my duty to demonstrate the kind of love that transcends the discipline and binds my child even closer to me through the discipline. Only when we comprehend God's love for us can we find the strength to walk away from sin and experience the glory God has prepared for us.

THE ART OF 'NEW'

Isaiah 65-66

The book, and message, of Isaiah culminates with the unveiling of new realities. Ultimately, what God promises as the final solution to human and environmental failure is 'new heavens and new earth'. This final passage begins by talking about the new things God will do and ends with a vision of these new realities which God creates. While judgement is still visible in this concluding refrain, the theme of newness dominates the notes of this final piece of Isaiah's vision. The structure of the passage is clearly delineated by two structural markers, 'this is what Yahweh says', (in 65:8; 65:13; and 66:1) and 'for look' (in 65:17 and 66:15), to provide the following:

- 65:8-12 Yahweh's new actions are introduced
- 65:13-16 Yahweh reverses his servants' fortunes
- 65:17-25 Yahweh creates new realities
- 66:1-14 Yahweh sits in judgement
- 66:15-24 Yahweh promises new realities

The creation verb *bara'* appears three times in 65:17-18 and heighten the newness of this creation. God emphatically states, 'For look! I am creating new heavens and a new earth' (vs 17). So radical is the new creation that the old one will not be remembered. In vs 18, a new nation is also created to inhabit Jerusalem. The precise meaning of 'new heavens and new earth' (also Rev 21:1) has generated much discussion. There are three major possibilities: (1) this is an idealised description of restored Jerusalem; (2) this is some sort of intermediate or millennial state of existence, perhaps a messianic era; and (3) this is the eternal re-creation of the universe. The use of the verb *bara'*, the *heaven-earth* merism (both of which are used in Genesis for primordial creation), and the eschatological overtone of the unit strongly supports the option that this is speaking about eternal re-creation of the cosmos. What is also new in this description is the coupling of new creation with joy. Two joy words are employed (twice each). 'Rejoice and rejoice' in vs 18 is followed by 'Jerusalem a joy and her people a joy'.

In the second paragraph of the unit, more new things are listed: a new humanity (vs 20), a new lifestyle (vs 21-22), a new relationship with Yahweh (vs 23-24) and a new relationship with the environment (vs 25). It appears everything will be 'new'.

The joy motif dominates vss 18-19 with both joy words used, but in vs 19 it is God who rejoices over his people and takes pleasure in what he creates (also Jer 31:41; Zeph 3:17). Yahweh's joy leads to two major promises. First, 'no more shall be heard in her the sound of weeping, the voice of distress' (vs 19). The word 'distress' echoes 5:7 where God says he hears a 'cry'. The distress of 5:7 is removed in 65:19. Second, 'no more shall be there and infant of days or an old one who does not fulfil his days; for the child a hundred years old (lit. 'son of a hundred years') shall die and the sinner a hundred years old shall be cursed' (vs 20; compare Zec 8:4). The precise meaning of vs 20 is nebulous at best. Perhaps it is part of a process leading ultimately to the complete restoration of nature, including the eradication of death. The ambiguity of the text renders any further discussion somewhat subjective.

If longevity is the promise in vs 20, then fulfilment of life is assured in vss 21-23. This is portrayed in very specific images: (1) to build houses and live in them (vs 21); (2) to plant vineyards and eat their fruit (vs 21); (3) to build and plant without losing the fruit of one's labour to others (vs 22); and (4) to experience fulfilment in producing work and children (vs 23; Gen 17:7). Two additional promises are made, 'for like the days of the tree (compare productive tree motif in 29:17; 32:15; 35:2; 60:13), the

days of my people and for they shall be seed of the blessed of Yahweh'. They will live to see their children unblighted by tragedy and in harmony with the things of God.

The unit ends with two beautiful descriptions of the new *heavens-earth*. First, there is a new response time from God: 'It shall be, before they call, I will answer, while they are speaking, I will hear' (vs 24). This is a drastic reversal of 1:15; God no longer delays or ignores his people. He knows everything they think, will pay attention to everything they say and provide instant answers to their queries. Second, environmental relationships undergo amazing transformation (vs 25; also 11:6-9; 35:9). Predator and prey (wolf and lamb) co-exist, while predators lose their killer instinct (typified by 'lion eating straw like ox'). Animals that were formerly enemies live in harmony in this new reality (Hos 2:18; Ezek 34:25, 28). God's re-creative work will impact every corner of the natural order. Consequently, there will be no damage or destruction, nothing that impairs or annuls, in God's holy mountain for this is what Yahweh declares.

The final chapter of Isaiah begins with 'this is what Yahweh says' which along with 'declaration of Yahweh' forms an envelope around vss 1-2. A second envelope appears in these lines where two questions are sandwiched by *heaven-earth* merism and creation statements: 'the heavens my seat and the earth my footstool (normally applied to the ark of the covenant; 1 Chron 28:2); what this the house which you will build for me? what this the place of my rest? [and] (a) all of these (b) my hand has made (b) they exist (a) all of these'. God cannot be pinned down even by his own institutions as he is always greater than what he has made (see 1 Kgs 8:27; Jer 7:8-15; John 2:19; Acts 7:44-50). He is the king of the universe, a common theme in prophetic preaching (6:1-6; 29:11; 37:16; 40:22; 63:15; Jer 10:10-11; Dan 4:17-37; 5:21; 6:26; 7:9) and in the songs of the nation (Pss 2:4; 11:4; 29:10; 47: 2, 7-9; 93:3; 95:3-5; 97:1, 9; 99:1-4). The heaven-earth merism and the chiasmic parallel of 'all of these' underpin a strong creation sense here that envelope the question of what anyone is capable to do for God.

God has other concerns in mind, namely the character of his people. 'This is the one I will consider (63:15; Pss 80:14; 84:9): the humble and contrite of spirit (also 57:15; Ps 51:17; Luke 18:9-14) and trembles at my word' (also 1:10-17; Jer 7:21-23; Ezra 9:4; 10:3). Seven clauses (vs 3) follow to paint a picture of what is or is not acceptable to God:

- (1) slaughtering an ox
- (2) killing a man
- (3) sacrificing lamb
- (4) breaking dog's neck (Exod 13:13; 34:20; Dt 21:1-9)
- (5) presenting offering, pig's blood
- (6) remembering frankincense
- (7) blessing an idol

It has been suggested that these statements were framed for their shock value, a technique employed by other prophets like Amos, Micah and Malachi. The word pictures describe the mixed-up intention and action of his people who combine the good (ox, lamb, sacrifice, incense) and the bad (dog, pig, idol), piety and violence, worship and horrible degradation (compare Isa 1).

This happens because (vs 3)

- (a) they have chosen
 - (b) their own ways
 - (b) and their own abominations
- (a) they delight

Their sin is not merely circumstantial, it is intentional and deliberate (1:11-15). God says (vs 4),

Therefore,

- (a) I have chosen
- (b) their afflictions
- (b) and their fears
- (a) I will bring to them

The syntactical parallels between vss 3 and 4 are uncanny: both are half verses, both comprise sentences starting with adverbs and both contain chiasmic arrangements. God's choice of human actions and deeds seems odd but could be understood better in periphrastic rendition of divine action being reciprocal and appropriate to the same degree as the sin itself.

The rest of vs 4 explains the rationale for this divine behaviour. God reiterates, 'I called but there is no one answering; I spoke but no one listened' (55:3; Deut 6:4; Ps 95:7-8). The words of 65:12 reappear, 'they did the evil in my eyes and what I do not delight they chose'. This heightens the tension felt in vss 3b-4a and recalls the threat of judgement from 65:12.

The following two paragraphs begin with similar sounding command in vs 5 and vs 10. 'Hear the word of Yahweh' (vs 5). This command is addressed to those who 'tremble at his word'. These are the people who have experienced the betrayal of their own brothers who demand empirical evidence of God's glory but ultimately are shamed (vs 5; compare 28:9-10; Ps 22:6-8; Rev 2:9). The sound that is finally heard in the city is that of Yahweh's recompense (vs 6). The staircase parallelism here captures the sound of this movement: 'a sound of uproar from the city; a sound from the temple; the sound of Yahweh rendering recompense to his enemies'. The triple use of 'sound' and the three-line staircase ascending from city to temple to Yahweh make an emphatic statement concerning God's judgemental action. The tragedy of this event is analogous to a woman giving birth to a child before birth pains (vs 7; 54:1).

The incredulity of all that happens is encapsulated in rather intriguing syntax. Two 'Who?' questions are followed by two lines which employ both interrogative and hypothetical particles: 'Who has heard of such a thing? Who has seen such things?' (vs 8). 'Is one born in the land in one day if a nation is born in one moment . . . (also 49:19-21; 54:1-3)? Am I causing birth . . . if I cause birth . . .?' (vs 9). The perplexing language (odd questions) in these verses underscores the incredulity of all that is about to happen and yet clearly establish the source of the events: 'Yahweh says' and 'your God says'.

The incredulity and perplexity of the preceding verses give way to a very different command. 'Rejoice with Jerusalem and rejoice with her all those who love her; rejoice with her in joy all those who mourn over her' (vs 10). The paradigm shift has a purpose expressed in two different statements about Zion; in her there is sufficient sustenance and abundance of supplies (vs 11; also 66:12). The analogies of a suckling child finding comfort in a mother's breast and travellers whose thirst is satiated enhance the mood shift. The use of three joy terms draws emphatic attention to the celebratory nature of this command (see 49:13; 51:11; 54:1; 60:5; 61:10-11; 65:13, 18-19; 66:5b).

The concluding sub-paragraph of this section takes off with the messenger formula 'for this is what Yahweh says'. God intends to bring 'peace' (*shalom*; see 48:18) and the 'glory of the nations' (60:4-11) to Israel and likens this to a river overflowing (vs 12a; 48:18). The second half of vs 12 reverts back to the child-mother metaphor of vs 11. The promise of vs 13 draws on the child-mother analogies of the previous verses and the promise of comfort first delivered in 40:1. God states that 'as one is comforted by his mother, also I will comfort you and in Jerusalem you shall be comforted'.

The analogy, source and place of this comfort are delineated. The emphatic nature of the promise is embedded in the repetition (three times) of 'comfort' and the use of the emphatic pronoun 'I'. The consequence of these shifts (vs 14) is twofold, Israel's new joyful vision ('you shall see and rejoice') and her new knowledge of God's power ('the hand of Yahweh shall be known by his servants'; 54:17), recognised even by her enemies ('his anger [the word occurs only here in Isaiah] against his enemies'). The cycle of comfort is now truly complete, for while it began with a double comfort in 40:1, it reaches the apex in 66:13 with a triple 'comfort'.

The arrangement of Isaiah's final pericope comprises two sets of parallels, judgement (vss 15-16 and 24) and false versus true worship (vss 17 and 22-23), and a central discussion on mission (vss 18-21).

Verses 15-16 focus on God's judgement symbolised by fire. Three times in these verses, Yahweh and fire are coupled together. He comes in 'fire' (vs 15a), expresses his anger with 'fire' (v' 15b), and executes judgement by 'fire' (v' 16). Judgement imagery is compounded by references to Yahweh's chariots and sword. The connection between fire and divine judgement is prominent in Isaiah and may be observed in several passages. In vs 16, the object of God's judgement is 'all flesh' and many are 'killed' by Yahweh (a reference to the scope of divine execution).

In vs 17, three participles describe the cultic practices of Israel which God found abhorrent: '*sanctifying* themselves, *purifying* themselves, and *eating* forbidden meats' (pig, vermin and mice). Their purpose for doing this is to enter 'the gardens', the pagan worship places (also 65:3-5). There are times when God calls his people to consecrate themselves in preparation to meet him (Exod 19:101-11, 14-15, 22; Josh 3:2, 5; 1 Sam 16:5). However, cultic malpractices permeated the religious life of Israel and God is adamantly opposed to such lifestyle; this is his declaration (vs 22).

The first two lines of vs 18 are somewhat ambiguous. Literally they read: 'And I, their works and their thoughts coming to gather all of the nations and tongues'. The last line is much clearer, 'they will come and they will see my glory'; that is the outcome. The word 'coming' coupled with 'to gather' provides some syntactical difficulty. Is 'coming to gather' a complement to 'their works and their thought' or to 'all the nations and tongues'? Or, is 'coming together' perhaps a qualifier for both? Perhaps God's knowledge of the hearts and thoughts of the nations underlines his intention to gather them (see 2:1-4; 11:10; 42:6; 45: 22-25; 49:6; 60:2).

In vss 19-20a, God announces certain components of his mission for his people: 'I will set among them a sign, I will send from them survivors to the nations, they shall declare my glory among the nations', and 'they shall bring all your brothers from all nations an offering to Yahweh'. In some instances, the expression 'set a sign' has negative connotations (see Exod 10:2; Jer 32:20; Ps 78:43). However, it is also used as a mark of protection (Gen 4:15) and a sign for those who belong to God (Ezek 9:4, 6). The reference to 'survivors' denotes those who have escaped a battlefield and are able to provide first-hand information of battlefield conditions.

There are significant recurring motifs in these verses. The expression 'my glory' occurs three times in vss 18-19 and states God's glory is seen and declared, a sharp contrast to his 'fire' in vss 15-16. The 'all nations' motif appears four times in vss 18-20a: 'to gather all *nations*, survivors to the *nations*, my glory among *nations*, and brothers from all *nations*'. These four references depict the universal nature of Israel's new mission. The universal nature of this gathering is pictured as trains of horses, chariots, wagons, mules and camels carrying the offerings to Yahweh's holy mountain, to Jerusalem (vs 20a).

The offerings of the nations are then compared to the offerings of the Israelites, brought in clean vessels to the house of Yahweh, the Temple. There is tacit acceptance of the offerings from the

nations as there was from Israel (vs 20b). The envelope of change is pushed further as God declares his intention to make some of the new pilgrims, priests and Levites (vs 21). The new covenant introduced in chapter 56 onward reaches its logical conclusion in this promise.

For one last time the merism *heaven-earth* is encountered in the book, but this time it is 'new heavens-new earth' which exists in tandem with 'stand' (vs 22).

For as

- (a) the new heavens and new earth, which I am making,
- (b) shall stand before me (declares Yahweh)
- (b) so shall stand
- (a) your descendants and your name.

'New heavens and new earth' reflect a similar use in 65:17 and both have eschatological creation in view. However, a different creation verb is used in vs 22. This is a generic creation term and refers to God's historical deeds (see Josh 24:17; Ps 98:1), his creative work (see Pss 86:9; 95:5; 96:5), the creative process (see 45:7; 66:2), and, analogous to its use in Gen 1:31, serves as the summary word for creation. The phrase 'which I am making' points to the future towards which all creation is moving. The verb 'stand' signifies durability and suggests that the new physical and human realities will last forever (Jer 32:14; Pss 102:27; 111:3). 'Descendants' most likely points to the redeemed of God gathered from all nations. These are the Servant's spiritual descendants (53:10; 54:17) who are repeatedly called 'my servants' (65:8-9, 13-15).

Now that a new day has dawned, what is the task of this new people?

'And it shall be, from new moon to new moon and from Sabbath to Sabbath, all flesh shall come to worship before me' (vs 23).

The first two lines of this description form a pair of synonymous parallels. Literally translated they read: 'from the sufficiency of new moon to its new moon' and 'from the sufficiency of Sabbath to its Sabbath'. The Hebrew term is a compound term which means 'sufficiency' or 'enough'. While a precise translation is difficult, the term usually denotes the idea of 'as often as' (1 Sam 7:16; Zec 14:16; 2 Chron 24:5). 'New moon and new Sabbath' is a paired idea seen elsewhere in the OT in texts such as Num 28:9-15; 2 Kgs 4:23; Hos 2:13; Amos 8:5 and Ezek 46:3. The ideas of regularity and constancy are depicted in this phrase and coming right after the creation statement of vs 22 implies that the new moon and new Sabbath experience is integral to the new eschatological reality. 'All flesh' in this verse is different from its usage in vs 15 where it points to those being judged by God but in vs 23 it reveals those who worship Yahweh, who bow before his presence (also 40:5).

The last verse of Isaiah appears to be an anachronistic one. It reads:

And they shall go out and look at the dead bodies of the men who have rebelled against me, for their worm shall not die; their fire shall not be quenched; they shall be an abhorrence to all flesh.

'They shall go out and look' parallels vs 18 but with a different meaning. In vs 18 they look at God's glory, in vs 24 at the demise of rebels. The death of these people is brought about because they 'rebelled' against God. The word 'rebel' occurs in several passages in Isaiah (1:2, 28; 43:27; 46:8; 53:12; 59:13; etc.) and is used far more than by any other prophet. The reference to maggots, rotting corpses and eternal fire (It may be best to view this unquenchable fire in terms of its consequence rather than its temporal nature) leaves the reader with a distinct distaste. Is such

dichotomy possible in this new world? Will the new creation truly be tainted by death and rottenness? The dissonance of the verse is not easily explained. I suggest the dissonance is inserted to remind us of the dissonance of sin first introduced in chapter 1 (more literary technique than temporal reality).

The final promise of the book of Isaiah is that God will not leave this world and humanity in the state in which we now exist. The effects of sin upon human nature and planet earth are self-evident. The hope of every religion is for a better world and even the ardently secular long for their utopia. Isaiah teaches that only Yahweh can reverse the effects of sin; it is the creator who can re-create the world. Every person of faith dreams of this reality and lives his or her life in anticipation of its fulfilment. The prophecy is more than a dream; it is a divine guarantee, a reality awaiting consummation. Despite the anachronism of Isaiah's final verse (66:24), the light of this prophecy is the hope of faith. God will re-create this world we live in and build for us an eternal, sinless home.

I know that most people like new things. There is a certain longing in the human soul for the new; whether this deals with things mundane or eternal. I also believe that such longing is accentuated by faith because there is little sense in believing in God if this sinful world is all we can have. Targeting this new world and the new realities God promises should be the primary preoccupation of every believer. The question to ask is, 'If the King of glory walks into our lives today to fulfil this promise, will he find us sleeping?'

CONCEPTS OF ISAIAH

In this section I discuss briefly some of the significant concepts arising from the book of Isaiah. While all these ideas are embedded in the preceding materials, here I will present them as theological themes of the book.

Isaiah's Religion

Isaiah 1:1-17 offers one of the clearest pictures of God's idea of religiosity and spirituality. What becomes immediately clear is the difference between being religious and being spiritual. Most believers tend to confuse the two or even make them synonymous. In Isaiah, religiosity is not the same as spirituality.

The question is, 'Religious ritual or relationships?' Which really matters more to God? Isaiah shows God has a strong dislike for loveless religious performance (vss 11-15). God is satiated with 'offerings' (vss 11-12), despises meaningless rituals (vs 13), finds meaningless rituals burdensome (vs 14) and will pay no attention to those who offer such rituals (vs 15). What God really cares more about (vss 16-17) are these: doing good, justice, correcting oppressors, defending orphans and fighting for the well-being of widows.

Isaiah 6:1-8, through Isaiah's own experience, provides a lens into true spirituality. This involves a transformative encounter with God as Isaiah did. The steps in Isaiah's story clue us to the steps of true spirituality. These are a personal meeting with God (vss 1-4), acknowledging non-parity with this holy God (vs 5), experiencing the transformation God provides (vss 6-7) and readiness to accept mission or divine commission (vs 8).

Another passage which impacts this is Isa 58:6-14. This text examines true religion, its causes and effects. Using conditional clauses of 'if...then', three sets of thoughts are highlighted. First, God told Israel, 'IF . . . you break and loosen bonds and share your blessings (vs 6-7), THEN . . . you will be glorified and the Lord will answer (vs 8-9)'. There is a reciprocal relationship between social concerns and blessing. Second, 'IF . . . you feed the hungry and care for those in pain (vs 10a), THEN . . . you will be glorified and rebuild and the Lord will lead and protect you (vs 10b-12)'. Social justice is again placed as condition for divine providence. Third, 'IF . . . you do not desecrate Shabbat, call shabbat 'delight' and honour Shabbat (vs 13), THEN . . . you will delight in the Lord and the Lord will elevate and reward you (vs 14)'. Relationship with God, via the proper observance of the Sabbath, outweighs ritual performance; God is always more relational than ritualistic.

This idea is not unique to Isaiah as there are parallel passages with virtually identical sentiments. Amos 5:4-15 looks at the injustices in the nation and arrives at the same conclusion as Isaiah. He tells his readers they must achieve social justice and equality in order to be truly blessed by God. Micah 6:1-8 carries the same thoughts and asserts that what God truly requires from his people is 'to practise justice, to love *khesed* (this is the word for covenantal love) and to walk humbly with God'. Proper treatment of others and covenantal relationship with God comprise true spirituality and these are not ritually-bound. In Matt 25:31-46, Jesus echoes these same thoughts. In his discourse about final judgement of the sheep and goats, Jesus insists that we will be judged entirely by our relational concerns for others rather than by ritual performance. The phrase, 'what you did to the least of my brothers, you did to me', becomes the yardstick by which God measures his people.

Isaiah's Creator

A second concept in Isaiah pertains to the creatorship of God. This is arguably Isaiah's most significant conceptualisation of God. This subject is introduced by Isaiah's use of creation words. He employs the Hebrew verb *bara* 21 times in the book. The word is always translated 'create', emphasises the result of creation and captures the idea of 'newness'. It portrays three dimensions of creation: cosmological, historical and eschatological. *Bara* is used only with God and implies creation by divine energy. Isaiah also uses *yatsar* 18 times. This word is derived from pottery and focuses on the process of creation. The word is applied mainly in the historical dimension and concerns what God is 'creating' in the human realm. A third word, *asah*, is used 22 times and serves as a summary creation word. All three words were first used in Genesis in the original creation narrative.

Isaiah also conveys the theme through metaphors alluding to creation. The metaphors of 'breath/spirit', 'work of his/my/your hand' and the 'heaven-earth' word pair (used 13 times) are constant reminders of what God creates. Whenever the metaphors are used, Isaiah is directing his readers back to the creation story and to the fact God is creator.

In summary, Isaiah's creation thought may be viewed in three ways. Creation is the pre-eminent thought of Isaiah and for him Yahweh is creator. Creation is multi-dimensional comprising cosmological (44:24-45:25), historical (43:1-7) and eschatological (4:2-6; 65:17-25) creation; it is a multidimensional truth. Creation is the result of divine word and activity; it is what God does first, foremost and always.

Isaiah's creation thought carries certain ramifications with regards to how we should understand God. The concept presents God as the incomparable One (40:18, 25; 44:7; 46:5), One who is unequalled (43:10; 44:6; 45:5-6), a fearsome deity (8:13) and the sovereign Lord (46:9-13). The name Yahweh Tsebaot, God's military title, indicates he marshals forces of heaven and earth and cosmic resources are at his disposal. The name Qadosh Yisra'el (Holy One of Israel), used 25 times, shows he is supremely holy (Isa 6:1-3); it stresses his transcendence over what he creates. Yahweh's total and absolute sovereignty is demonstrated (44:24-28; 45:7) and a proper relational position for humans is 'servant' (45:4). Yahweh's purposes are inviolable (45:9-10) and he provides sustenance and salvation (45:22-25). In other words, Isaiah's creator is the One and Only God who performs wondrous acts. He is the saviour, the holy one, the judge of his people and he promises a better 'hereafter'.

Isaiah's King

Isaiah's view of God extends beyond creatorship; for him, God is also king and ruler of his domain. This may be seen in the rulership terms he employs. For instance, *melek* (king) is used 7 times in Isaiah (6:5; 32:1; 33:17, 22; 41:21; 43:15; 44:6) in contexts involving theophany, messianic king, salvation, judgement and divine self-predication. The verb *malak* (to rule) occurs once (24:23) in an eschatological context, while its correlative *malkut* (kingdom) also appears once (9:7) in a messianic context. This king occupies the same temporal and spatial realms as the creator.

Throughout Isaiah, there is an interplay between King and kings, the Creator Sovereign and human monarchs. In chapter 6, the death of Uzziah, a great but flawed king, finds Isaiah at the Temple pondering the future of the nation. It is here that he sees the King who is on a highly exalted throne. Chapter 7 portrays a king Ahaz's refusal to listen to God the King but still learns that Yahweh indeed controls the universe and human affairs. Chapter 10 portrays Assyria, a super power at the time, as an instrument of the King who governs all things. In chapter 14 we witness the humiliation of the king of Babylon, who typifies Satan, the great usurper, by the King of heaven. Chapter 38 relates the

experience Hezekiah, a king whose life and death were governed by a higher power, the King of kings. Even the great Persian king, Cyrus, is presented as one chosen by God (chapter 45) who is King over Cyrus.

There are certain concepts arising from this survey of Yahweh as King. First, the greatest human kings all die but the King lives forever. Second, rebellious and godless kings are still under the King's power. Third, all kings are simply instruments of the King's will and all kings will ultimately be humbled before the King. Fourth, the King controls life and death even of kings. Fifth, the King chooses kings for his own purposes and it is he who directs their every move. Therefore, When the King is in the house, the rules change; rules of sovereignty, life and death and power and control. Yahweh is truly King of kings and Lord of lords. The many songs in the book are simply testament to the King because they are the best way to address the King and declare his greatness and deeds.

Isaiah's Redeemer

For many scholars, Isaiah's redemptive theology is thought to be the foundational concept of the book. It certainly is a direct companion of his creatorship for the creator is the one who saves. Perhaps it is the counterpart to Isaiah's creation theology.

God's redemptive activities are pictured in salvation words. The Hebrew term *yasha* is used 26 times in Isaiah. Its basic meaning is 'to deliver' and may apply to physical, health, military, political or spiritual) deliverance. A more intriguing word is *ga'al* which occurs 23 times but whose basic meaning is 'to redeem' ('to exchange'). This word provides a different idea of salvation and is best understood by comparing it with concept of *go'el* ('redeemer') in the book of Ruth.

The Ruth-Boaz story provides the necessary *go'el* qualifications for Boaz and by extension the messiah or redeemer of the world. The NY utilises the elements of Ruth to describe the redemptive work of Jesus; this is especially true of the letter to the Hebrew. A 'redeemer' should the following qualities:

- He must be able to redeem (Heb 2:18; 4:15-16); he must have the resources and power to perform redemption
- He must be willing (2 Pet 3:9; John 3:16); he must possess a heart for redemption
- He must be blood relative (Heb 2:17; John 1:14); he must be genetically bound to those he is redeeming

So, who is this 'redeemer'? For Isaiah, he is the Creator (43:3, 14-15; 44:24) for only the Creator can save. God's creativity engenders faith in his salvation (4:2-6; 44:24-28); we trust God can save because of his creative power. Salvation is an act of creation; it is what God is doing in the historical dimension. Salvation and redemption are the flip side of creation.

Isiah's salvation thought can also be found in salvation metaphors like the Exodus motif (4:2-6), Second exodus (11:11-16), the Garden from the desert (35:1-10), the way of the Lord (40:3-5), Warrior and shepherd imagery (40:9-11), water in the desert (41:17-20) and new entry into promised land (49:8-12). Salvation images also include the Branch (chapter 4 and 11), Immanuel (chapter 7), Messiah (chapter 9), Israel's comforter (chapter 40), Israel's helper (chapter 41), the Servant (Chapters 42, 49, 50, 52-53) and Israel's Redeemer or *Go'el* (chapter 43).

Certain chapters in the book provide significant information to impact the salvation topic. Isaiah 35 tells of total liberation involving nature (vss 1-2, 7) and humanity (vss 3-6). It even records humanity's celebration (vss 8-10) of this salvific act of God. Isaiah 55 offers redemption invitation

with 'come' (vss 1-2), 'listen' (vss 3-5) and 'seek' (vss 6-7). Salvation is something we have to sense the need for even though God performs the act. Therefore, redemption comes with divine guarantee (vss 8-11) and is accompanied with celebration (vss 12-13). The most complete picture emerges in Isaiah 61 which also speak of total liberation but goes beyond the generalities of chapter 35. Here the Redeemer is chosen by God (vs 1a). the Redeemer's work is described (vss 1b-3) as healing broken hearts, freeing captives, proclaiming God's favour and providing for mourners. The results of redemption (vss 4-9) are also spelt out-- rebuilding work, being served by others, becoming priests of God and receiving double possession. Like the other passages, this chapter also climaxes with celebration of redemption (vss 10-11). While God is the redeemer, we seek that salvation and celebrate it.

Isaiah's song

Isaiah's Complexity is observed in the three responses of God towards his people. Isaiah 1 shows how God is repulsed by Israel's sin; Isa 40 provides assurances that God still loves Israel; and Isa 60 explains how God elevates Israel. An unnoticed method of Isaiah to accomplish his portrayal of God is through song. In Isaiah, song is a significant motif and the book employs the three main song words: *shir*, *zamar* and *ranan*. These song words are used 39 times in the book, while the command to 'sing' appears 8 times. Every major segment of the book culminates in song. Below is a listing of Songs in Isaiah.

Passage	Song
Isa 5:1-7	Song of the Vineyard
Isa 12:1-6	Song of Praise
Isa 25:1-5	Song of Praise
Isa 26:1-21	Song of Victory
Isa 35:1-10	Song of the Redeemed
Isa 42:10-20	Song of Praise
Isa 54:1-17	Song of Victory
Isa 55:1-13	Song of the Redeemed

An excellent sample of song in Isaiah is chapter 12. The song comes at the end of the first segment of Isaiah (chs 1-12). This segment oscillates between gloom and doom passages and hope passages. Isaiah 12 is the first 'song of praise'. It has 2 stanzas, vss 1-3 and 4-6, and each stanza commences with 'in that day'. All 3 song words are used in this song. A brief structural presentation of the song is presented below.

Stanza 1

- 'I will praise you, Lord'
- Reasons for praise:
 - 'you had compassion' (vs 1)
 - 'God is my salvation' (vs 2)
 - 'the Lord is my strength and my song' (vs 2)

Stanza 2

Liturgical implication

- 'give thanks to the Lord' (vs 4)
- 'sing to the Lord' (vs 5)
- 'cry out and sing' (vs 6)

Missiological implication

- 'proclaim his name' (vs 4)

- ‘celebrate his deeds (vs 5)
- ‘declare his name’ (vs 5)

The implications of the Song are twofold: ‘Song’ is the most appropriate language of worship; it is the best way to talk to God and ‘Song’ is the most appropriate language of mission; it is the best way to talk about God. The question remains, ‘Is ‘song’ in Isaiah a metaphor or is it literal?’ In one sense, it is a metaphor of our worship and mission. It is also meant to be literal; God wants his people to sing. The Psalms command us ‘to sing a new song to the Lord’ (Ps 149:1). Paul tells us to ‘rejoice in the Lord always’ (Phil 4:4). John shows us that the principal activity around God’s throne is singing (Rev 4 and 19). The challenge is to sing a new song realising that ‘song’ prevents us from talking about each other, ‘song’ puts a hold on our complaints, ‘song’ tells those around us that our faith is real, ‘song’ shifts our focus away from our self-absorption and ‘song’ keeps us connected with God.

Isaiah and Revelation

The impact of Isaiah on the NT in general and Revelation in particular cannot be underestimated. First, we examine how Isaiah is used in the NT. Isaiah is the prophet of the NT and is frequently mentioned by name. He is quoted two times more than other major prophets and more than all minor prophets combined. Isaiah is quoted, paraphrased, alluded to and echoed throughout NT. About 56 of 66 chapters are represented in NT (150x from 1-39, 168x from 40-55, 89x from 56-66). This is why he may be called ‘Gospel Prophet’.

Isaiah plays an even bigger role in the book of Revelation. He is not quoted by name in Revelation yet there are about 50 ‘certain and probable’ allusions to Isaiah in Revelation. These involve 23 sections of Isaiah but the four prominent passages are: 6:1-4; 34:4, 9-11, 13-14; 60:1-3, 5, 11, 14, 19; and 65:17-20. Certain areas are of special importance, such as, visionary language and experience (Isa 6:1-4), Christological titles and descriptions (Isa 11:4, 10; 22:22; 44:6; 65:15), eschatology (Isa 34:4; 55:1; 60:1-3, 5, 11, 19) and new realities (Isa 65:17 ff). Dominant parallels include God’s throne room (Isa 6 – Rev 4), origin of evil (Isa 14 – Rev 12), new heaven, new earth (Isa 65-66 – Rev 21-22), angel description (Isa 6 – Rev 4), theophany result (Isa 6 – Rev 1) and the use of ‘song’.

Another view of this relationship is to uncover how Revelation draws upon Isaiah’s phraseology which is then adopted by the Church as part of Christian jargon. Following are samples of this:

- ‘Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts’ (Isa 6:3 → Rev 4:8)
- ‘The key of the house of David’ (Isa 22:22 → Rev 3:7)
- ‘The skies shall roll up like a scroll’ (Isa 34:4 → Rev 6:14)
- ‘I am the first and the last’ (Isa 44:6 → Rev 1:17; 22:13)
- ‘Come, everyone that thirsts’ (Isa 55:1 → Rev 21:6; 22:7)
- ‘Your gates shall be opened continually’ (Isa 60:1 → Rev 21:25)
- ‘The sun shall be no more your light by day’ (Isa 63:3 → Rev 19:15)
- ‘Behold, I create new heavens and a new earth’ (Isa 65:17 → Rev 21:1)

One simple way to catch the connections between Isaiah and Revelation is by conducting inter-textual search. The following Tables demonstrate how deep the connections are between the two books. This inter-textuality is based on three criteria: linguistic correspondence, structural similarities and conceptual harmony. Applying these three criteria unveils the true extent of the inter-textuality between Isaiah and Revelation. The Tables below are also divided into specific components to make them more readable. Even the quickest perusal reveals how closely Isaiah influences the language, symbols and concepts of Revelation.

Rev 4:1-11 One seated on the Throne	
'a throne in heaven'	Isa 6:1 'throne'
'One seated on the throne'	Isa 6:1 'lord seated on throne'
'four living creatures covered with eyes'; 'each with six wings'; 'holy, holy, holy . . .'	Isa 6:2-3 'seraphim . . . each one had six wings'; 'holy, holy, holy . . .'
Rev 1:9-20 Jesus Christ	
'long robe with gold sash'	Isa 22:21 'robe . . . sash'
Rev 2:8 'the First and the Last' Rev 21:6 'I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End' Rev 22:13 'I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End'	Isa 41:4 'I, Yahweh, am the first and with the last, I am he' Isa 44:6 'Yahweh . . . says: I am the first and I am the last' Isa 48:12 'I am the first, I am also the last'
'I hold keys of death and Hades'	Isa 22:23 'the key of the house of David'
Rev 5:1-14 Jesus Christ	
'Root of David'	Isa 11:1, 10 'a shoot will grow from the stump of Jesse . . . on that day the root of Jesse'
'like a slaughtered lamb'	Isa 53:7 'like a lamb led to the slaughter'

Rev 22:12-16 Jesus Christ	
'First and Last'	Isa 41:4 'I, Yahweh, am the first and with the last, I am he' Isa 44:6 'Yahweh . . . says: I am the first and I am the last' Isa 48:12 'I am the first, I am also the last'
'Root and Offspring of David'	Isa 11:1, 10 'a shoot will grow from the stump of Jesse . . . on that day the root of Jesse'
'Bright Morning Star'	Isa 14:12 'shining morning star'

Rev 4:4, 9-11 The 24 Elders	
'elders' 'sat on thrones'	Isa 14:9 'he makes all kings . . . rise from their thrones'
'sing song to God'	Isa 6:3 Seraphs singing Isa 12:5 'sing to Yahweh'
Rev 5:8-10 The 24 Elders	
'sang a new song'	Isa 42:10 'sing a new song to Yahweh'

Rev 14:1-5 The 144,000	
'sang a new song . . . no one could learn but them'	Isa 42:10 'sing a new song to Yahweh'
'redeemed from the earth . . . redeemed from the human race'	Isa 51:11 'and the redeemed of Yahweh shall come' Isa 62:2 'they will be called the Holy People, Yahweh's Redeemed'
'not defiled with women'	Isa 59:3 'your hands are defiled with blood'

Rev 7:9-17 The Great Multitude	
'washed and whitened robes in blood of the Lamb'	Isa 4:4 'when Yahweh has washed away the filth of Zion'
'will not hunger'	Isa 49:10 'they will not hunger or thirst'
'will not thirst'	Isa 49:10 'they will not hunger or thirst'
'sun and heat will not strike them'	Isa 49:10 'the scorching heat or sun will not strike them'
'he will guide them to springs of living waters'	Isa 41:18 'I will open . . . dry land into springs of water' Isa 49:10 'lead them to springs of water' Isa 58:11 'you will be like a spring whose waters never run'

	dry'
'God will wipe away every tear from their eyes'	Isa 25:9 'the Lord God will wipe away the tears from every face'
Rev 15:2-4 The Great Multitude	
'won the victory over the beast'	Isa 25:8 'he will swallow up death in victory'
'sang the song of God's servant Moses, and the song of the Lamb'	Isa 42:10 'sing a new song to Yahweh'

Rev 12:1-2, 5-6, 13-18 The Celestial Woman	
'woman'	Isa 54:5-6 'for Yahweh has called you like a wife'
'moon under her feet'	Isa 30:26 speaks of 'moonlight' and 'sunlight'
'dragon . . . persecuted the woman'	Isa 27:1 God's victory over the monster Leviathan
'who have the testimony of Jesus'	Isa 8:16 'bind up testimony and seal up Torah'

Rev 12:3-4, 7-9 13-18 The Dragon	
'great fiery red Dragon'	Isa 27:1 God's victory over the monster Leviathan
'his tail swept away a third of the stars in heaven'	Isa 14:13 'I will set up my throne above the stars of God'
'war in heaven . . . '	Isa 14:13-15 'I will ascend to the heavens . . . I will make myself like the Most High'
'could not prevail . . . no place in heaven . . . was thrown out'	Isa 14:12 'Shining morning star, how you have fallen from heaven'
'called ancient serpent, devil and Satan'	Isa 27:1 'the fleeing serpent . . . the twisting serpent'
Rev 20:1-3, 7-15 The Dragon	
'in the abyss'	Isa 14:9,11,15 'Sheol below is eager to greet you', 'your splendour has been brought down to Sheol' and 'you will be brought down to Sheol' Isa 14:15,19 'into the deepest regions of the pit' 'dumped into a rocky pit'
'fire came down from heaven and consumed them'	Isa 66:15 'will come with fire . . . to execute his anger . . . with flames of fire'

Rev 17:1-18:24 The Debased Woman	
'notorious prostitute'	Isa 57:3 'offspring of . . . a prostitute'
'commit sexual immorality'	Isa 23:16-17 'prostitute/prostituting'
'drunk with the blood of the saints'	Isa 29:9 'they are drunk, but not with wine' Isa 49:26 'drunk with their own blood'
'Babylon has fallen'	Isa 21:9 'Babylon has fallen, has fallen'
'come out of her my people'	Isa 48:20 'leave Babylon; flee from the Chaldeans'
'she says in her heart . . . '	Isa 14:13 'you said to yourself'

Rev 6:1-17; 8:1-6 Seven Seals	
'four living creatures'	Isa 6:2-3 song of 'seraphim'
'told to rest a little while longer'	Isa 14:3 'when Yahweh give you rest from . . . the hard labour' Isa 28:12 'this is the rest' Isa 63:14 'the Spirit of Yahweh gave them rest'
'violent earthquake'	Isa 29:6 'with thunder, earthquake, and loud noise'
'sun turned black like sackcloth'	Isa 13:10 'the sun will be dark'
'moon became like blood'	Isa 24:23 'the moon will be put to shame'

'sky separated like a scroll'	Isa 34:4 'the skies will roll up like a scroll'
'fall on us and hide us'	Isa 2:10 'go into the rocks and hide in the dust'

Rev 15:1-16:1 Seven Plagues

'sang song of God's servant Moses, and the song of the Lamb'	Isa 42:10 'sing a new song to Yahweh'
'with gold sashes wrapped around their chests'	Isa 22:20 'sash around him'
'sanctuary filled with smoke'	Isa 6:4 'temple was filled with smoke'

Rev 14:6-20 The Winepress

'worship Maker of heaven and earth, the sea and springs of water'	Isa 37:16 'you made the heavens and the earth'
'a second angel saying, Babylon has fallen'	Isa 21:9 'Babylon has fallen, has fallen'
'who made all nations drink the wine of her sexual immorality, which brings wrath'	Isa 29:9 'they are drunk, but not with wine' Isa 49:26 'drunk with their own blood'
'seated on the cloud'	Isa 19:1 'Yahweh rides on a swift cloud'
'gather . . . from earth's vineyard'	Isa 5:7 'the vineyard of the Lord'
'into the winepress of God's wrath'	Isa 63:3 'I trampled the winepress . . . in My anger'

Rev 19:11-21 The Rider

'called Faithful and True'	Isa 1:4; 5:19, 24; etc 'Holy One of Israel' Isa 65:16 'God of Amen . . . God of Amen'
'judges and makes war'	Isa 11:3-4 'he will judge . . . he will strike'
'eyes like fiery flames'	Isa 6:4 'temple filled with smoke'
'from mouth sharp sword'	Isa 66:16 'and by his sword'
'trample the winepress'	Isa 5:1-7 'my vineyard . . . it will be trampled'
'great supper of God'	Isa 25:6 'Yahweh Tsebaot will prepare a feast for all people'

Rev 21:1:22:5 New Heaven and Earth

'a new heaven and a new earth'	Isa 65:17; 66:22 'a new heaven and new earth'; 'the new heavens and the new earth'
'first heaven and first earth passed away'	Isa 65:17 'the past events'
'Holy City, new Jerusalem'	Isa 65:18 'I will create Jerusalem'
'they will be his people'; 'God will be . . . their God'	Isa 65:19, 22 'My people'; My people . . . My chosen ones'
'wipe away every tear'	Isa 25:8 'God will wipe away the tears from every face'
'grief, crying, and pain will exist no longer'	Isa 65:19 'the sound of weeping and crying will no longer be heard in her'
'the previous things have passed away'	Isa 65:17 'the past events'

Rev 22:6-21 Epilogue

'the First and the Last'	Isa 41:4 'I, Yahweh, am the first and with the last, I am he' Isa 44:6 'Yahweh . . . says: I am the first and I am the last' Isa 48:12 'I am the first, I am also the last'
'I am the Root and Offspring of David'	Isa 11:1, 10 'a shoot will grow from the stump of Jesse . . . on that day the root of Jesse'
'the Bright Morning Star'	Isa 14:12 'shining morning star'
'the one who is thirsty should come'	Isa 55:1 'come, everyone who is thirsty'

The close bond between the two prophetic works demonstrates the importance of not studying any Bible book in vacuum. Often Revelation is studied as if it stood alone without recognising it really stands on the shoulders of previous prophets. To fully understand Revelation, we should first come to terms with Isaiah and other OT works which impact the Apocalypse.

This has been a rather inadequate journey into the book of Isaiah. Nevertheless, we have seen enough to whet our appetites to know more. My prayer is that this truncated study will inspire a longer and more intensive journey as we continue to wrestle with a writer who was nothing short of genius and a prophet who is appropriately called 'Prince of Prophets'.



God bless!

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