
***§1 Introduction: Jerusalem Judged and Restored
(Isa. 1:1–2:1)***

Chapter 1 introduces both the message of Isaiah ben Amoz over three decades and the book as a whole. The people have paid the penalty for abandoning their relationship with Yahweh (vv. 2–9) and need to own the fact that they have perverted their life with Yahweh by practicing religion but not justice (vv. 10–20); judgment can then be a creative purging that restores justice as well as the relationship (vv. 21–31).

1:1 / The fact that the word **vision** always denotes a particular revelation suggests that verse 1 is the introduction to chapter 1 and not the whole book, as the first verse of Ezekiel introduces Ezekiel 1–3. Visions may portend evil or promise good. In this one we move from a focus on the first to a focus on the second before we get to the end of the chapter.

In the OT, the phrase **Judah and Jerusalem** usually refers to the small community living in Judah, with their focus on Jerusalem, after the temple had been rebuilt in the period of Haggai and Zechariah. They were a tiny community, but they understood themselves as the true people of God. The phrase thus invites this small Second Temple community (and by extension other subsequent readers such as ourselves) to read the chapter—and what it in turn introduces—as addressing themselves, not as confined in its application to Isaiah’s own day. Reduced to a remnant and consoling itself by focusing on its life of worship, this community too is urged to look to its secular community life, to beware of Yahweh’s judgment, but to look for Yahweh’s rebuilding.

The vision comes to a particular prophet, **Isaiah son of Amoz**. Isaiah himself is part of his very message and ministry. His name, “Yahweh is salvation,” declares Yahweh’s promise. His wife and children share in the same involvement (see especially 7:1–8:18). His message relates in the first instance to the time of Judah’s four kings **Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah** (see 6:1; 7:1,

3, 10, 12; 14:28; 36:1–39:8), from about 740 to 700 B.C. (see Introduction). It was the end of a period of prosperity and achievement and associated social inequality, the beginning of a period of foreign domination, and a time that saw both religious apostasy and religious reform (see 2 Kgs. 15–20; 2 Chron. 26–32; as well as Isaiah and Micah).

1:2–4 / Isaiah’s unsurprising introductory **Listen** turns out to be addressed not to Judah (except indirectly), but rather to the **heavens** and the **earth**. Perhaps the picture is of Yahweh standing in court, appealing to the witnesses to the covenant between Yahweh and Israel (cf. Mic. 6:1–2).

Yahweh is in the position of the parent of a rebellious child, expected to bring the child before the community court (see Deut. 21:18–21). **Rebelled** is a relational word, the opposite of being loyal, committed, and faithful. **Forsaken** and **spurned** also describe the actions of a child abandoning its parents and their teaching. Those who have **turned their backs** are people who behave like strangers to their family; the related word for stranger/foreigner comes twice in verse 7. Isaiah expresses the indignation and hurt of Yahweh as the father or mother who has been rejected and despised by his or her children (see Hos. 11).

The one they have spurned is **the Holy One of Israel**: this is the book’s distinctive title for God. It was a title that Isaiah especially took up, presumably as a result of the experience that will be described in chapter 6. In the OT, “holy” is not so much a moral term as a metaphysical one. It denotes deity in its awesome differentness and transcendence. So “Holy One of Israel” expresses the paradox whereby the awesome, mighty, sovereign creator enters into a relationship with a specific, ordinary, created, human people. That paradox hints at the trouble that will result if this people resists the holy one (an underlying theme of chs. 1–33), but it also alludes to the security this relationship brings to that people, and thus to its deliverance when they are in need (an underlying theme of chs. 34–66).

Knowing (v. 3) is a matter of recognition and acknowledgment, of will as well as mind; **does not know** thus has similar implications to **rebelled**. Yahweh is Israel’s parent and thus teacher. The people of Israel are Yahweh’s children, expected to learn from their teacher in the way presupposed in Proverbs as well as Deuteronomy (e.g., Prov. 1:8–9; 4:1–4; Deut. 6:6–7; 11:19–21). But they are willfully lacking in moral and spiritual insight. That is so de-

spite the fact that they are **my people**: the phrase regularly conveys a poignancy as it characteristically occurs in contexts that suggest suffering, calamity, danger, and fear—or, in contrast, deliverance, restoration, and provision (e.g., 3:12, 15; 5:13; 10:2, 24). Here too, it recalls the nature of the relationship between Israel and Yahweh. The trouble is, the arrangement does not work. Even the family animals do better than the children in this respect.

Instead of behaving like Israel, they are a **sinful nation**; instead of behaving like “my people,” they are a **people loaded with guilt** (see on 5:18). Judah is both nation (a political entity) and people (a family writ large). They are also a **brood of evildoers**, “offspring who do evil” (NRSV), despite being “holy offspring” by their association with Yahweh (6:13). Although they belong to Yahweh’s family, they are **children given to corruption** instead of children with the family likeness. The nature of this evil and corruption remains to be indicated.

1:5–7 / Now direct address to the people describes the pain resulting from their sin. Once more their **rebellion** is spoken of, with its consequences, though strangely (or not) it is spoken of in poignant and grieving terms rather than merely confrontationally and aggressively. The people are bruised and battered like a child who has been beaten by its parents or an adult who has been mugged. Why do they insist on more such punishment? We will learn more in chapter 36 of the invasion described in verse 7, which took place in 701 B.C. toward the end of Isaiah’s ministry. Sennacherib’s own records tell of his conquering forty-six of Judah’s towns, citadels, and villages and driving out more than 200,000 people. In laying siege to Jerusalem he turned Hezekiah into a prisoner there “like a bird in a cage”—though he did not actually take the city.

1:8–9 / **Daughter of Zion** sounds as if it implies that the people is the daughter of the actual city, but more likely it parallels phrases such as “State of Israel” or “City of Jerusalem.” Zion does not have a daughter; she is personified as a daughter. The phrase suggests that she should be a woman deserving of respect (not necessarily a young woman), but she has become an isolated, abandoned one. “Zion” refers to the same place as “Jerusalem” but draws more explicit attention to the city’s religious significance; “Jerusalem” has more of the resonances of an earthly physical city.

The consequences of invasion for Mademoiselle Zion are expressed in similes. She has become like one of those isolated and

primitive structures where lookouts kept watch or the family slept during harvest to protect their crop, or **like a city under siege**—which is exactly what she has been. **Is left/had left us some survivors** announces a major theme in Isaiah, the remnant or remains that are all that is left after decimation (see on 4:2). But at least that is something; they might have been destroyed as comprehensively as **Sodom and Gomorrah** (Gen. 19:24–29). On the title **the LORD Almighty**, see on verse 24.

1:10–15a / Yahweh feels a distaste for the people’s enthusiastic worship because it is not accompanied by a commitment to justice. The challenge in verses 10–20 evidently belongs to an earlier period, when disaster might still be avoided. **Hear . . . listen** again has the resonances of a court scene. **The law of our God** often refers to the contents of Exodus to Deuteronomy, but the word *torah* can also denote a parent’s, sage’s, priest’s, or prophet’s “teaching” (NRSV), and the broader meaning is appropriate in Isaiah.

Judah is now addressed directly, but by means of a metaphor. Zion has played into Yahweh’s hands by comparing its fate to Sodom and Gomorrah’s. Yahweh wishes to compare Zion’s thinking and behavior to theirs, the oppression that caused an outcry (Gen. 18:20–21; 19:13; Ezek. 16:49); see verses 15–17 (and 5:7). While the OT and NT both make clear that the worship of God’s people is important to them and to God, they also make clear that this worship easily gains an undue importance. Here Isaiah comprehensively dismisses the people’s worship in its various aspects. Yahweh is force-fed unwanted food, and unwanted guests repeatedly invade Yahweh’s home. Sacrifice’s pleasant accompaniments are **detestable**, the technical term for loathsome religious practices or moral acts, and people’s visits for regular worship events are a burdensome nuisance. Lest Christian readers congratulate themselves on not being involved in the kind of worship that so offends Yahweh, Isaiah tells us that this offensiveness extends to prayer, to which Yahweh shuts both eyes and ears. Why?

1:15b–20 / Yahweh thus sets out conditions for hearing prayer. Yahweh’s reason for rejecting Judah’s worship is not that in their hearts people did not mean what they said and what their sacrifices imply. As far as we can tell, they meant every hallelujah and every amen. The problem was that their sincerely meant worship was not accompanied by a commitment to Yahweh in life in

society. The hands raised in prayer **are full of blood**, the blood of people victimized in the community. Zion is supposed to defend the weak (v. 17), but the needs of the weak in society have been ignored, so they fail to get enough to eat, or they lose their land and thus their livelihood, and in due course their lives. As in modern societies, the well-off lived better than the less well-off, and statistics regarding health and life-expectancy reflected this. **Cause and case** suggest additional reference to the administration of justice. When someone without family or resources got into debt, creditors could easily and legally get the court to foreclose on the debt and take away the person's land.

The community is therefore bidden to **wash and make yourselves clean** (v. 16a). It is responsible for getting the blood off its own hands by giving up the **evil deeds** that stand scandalously before Yahweh's eyes and make it impossible for Yahweh to look at people when they pray (v. 16a).

Positively, they are to **learn to do right and seek justice** (v. 17; and see on v. 21). A paradox appears here, or rather a different understanding of justice. The key principle of justice is not that everyone should be treated the same and in accordance with the law of the land, but that the needy should be protected. It would not count as justice for decisions to be technically legal but to work for the benefit of the powerful and the loss of the weak. To be judged therefore need not be bad news. It can be good news, if it means having the legal system applied to you as a weak person. The community has an obligation to see that this happens, and it has blood on its hands if it neglects this duty.

Verses 18–20 repeat the point. **Reason together** is rather mild; “argue it out” (NRSV) reminds us that all this takes place in the context of a metaphorical court case between Yahweh and Judah. Again Yahweh declares that their hands are **scarlet . . . red . . . crimson**, covered in blood. **They shall be as white as snow . . . like wool** is not an invitation to seek Yahweh's cleansing and forgiveness, which would be to offer cheap grace and to collude with what the people believed already. The **shall** is a “shall” of demand, like that of the Ten Commandments. They must cleanse the blood off their hands and be **obedient** if they want Yahweh to answer their prayers for the harvest (vv. 18–20). The closing line (v. 20b) underlines the certainty of the warning in verses 19–20a.

1:21–23 / Isaiah starts again, sharpening the charge in a way that will lead into an announcement of judgment in verses

24–31. **See how** is the exclamation that introduces a lament or a death dirge. The issue is the same as in verses 2–4, but the husband-wife metaphor has replaced the parent-children metaphor. **Justice** comes from the verb “judge” (see on v. 17); the book of Judges shows how judging involves taking decisive action. It is a power word. **Righteousness** denotes what accords with the norm of rightness embodied in Yahweh (see on 5:16, where a sister word comes). Together, then, justice and righteousness are a key pair suggesting the exercise of authority in accordance with right, or a commitment to right that can be expressed in the exercise of power.

The accusation against the community’s **rulers** (v. 23) gives precision to the charge. The term for rulers is a general one, but what follows suggests a reference to people responsible for justice. This fits with verses 11–20 and indicates that their failure issued from seeking wrongful gain (see 5:23). The issue is once again the leadership’s responsibility for the administration of justice in a way that exercises positive discrimination on behalf of the weak. Failure here, along with an inclination to use the legal system in a way that might have been legal but was designed to benefit people in power, is what turns leaders into **murderers**.

1:24–25a / After an accusation and implicit declaration of guilt comes a sentencing, introduced by a prophet’s characteristic thumping **therefore**. The declaration begins literally “oracle of the Lord . . .,” a common solemn introduction or conclusion to a saying that a prophet thereby emphasizes is God’s and not merely the prophet’s. The string of titles for God that follows: **the Lord, the LORD Almighty, the Mighty One of Israel . . .** underlines the power of this opening. “The Lord” designates God as sovereign king. The title “the LORD Almighty” suggests that Yahweh (lit., “Yahweh armies”) controls mighty resources and is thus able to implement a purpose in the world, while “Mighty One” applies to Yahweh an expression that suggests power like that of a bull (see Additional Notes). Each of these titles adds to the sense that what we are about to hear comes from a mightily powerful God—a comfort no doubt to friends, but a threat to enemies. These names would have been familiar to Isaiah’s hearers. Here they are being turned against them.

Get relief and **avenge myself** sound very like each other in Hebrew and combine subjective feelings and objective justice. Yahweh will now get the relief of giving expression to a strongly-

felt inner desire to express anger. “Avenge myself” adds the notion of fair punishment; it is a less emotional expression than the English one. **I will turn my hand against you** adds the idea of direct, careful, personal involvement. The hand that was designed to work for them and against their enemies is turned the other way.

1:25b–26 / Now a surprising transition comes about. The act of judgment with wholly negative intent becomes an act of purging with creative, positive intent. The grieved and angered father wants to recreate and not just destroy. Sometimes these events come sequentially—first judgment, then renewal (e.g., 8:21–9:7). Sometimes the one transmogrifies into the other—judgment seems to be happening but it turns into deliverance (e.g., ch. 31). Here the same event is both an act of judgment and an act of restoration, reversing the effects seen in verses 21–23. It is by attacking the dross that God restores the city to what it should be.

Verse 25b is more compressed, more concrete, and more uncomfortable than the translation implies: “I will smelt your dross [by heating to very high temperatures] like potash [used as a flux in the smelting process].” What Yahweh will literally do is **restore your judges/counselors**. They will then be in a position to see that community affairs are conducted in the proper way, whether at the level of the courts or at the level of forming and implementing political policies. Thus Zion will once again be **the City of Righteousness**, “Justice City,” and once again **Faithful City**. The ideal is restored.

1:27–31 / The double-sided point about punishment and restoration is now put in a different way. This redeeming of the city is an act of payment expected of the city itself. It has responsibility for the reshaping of its life in accordance with just judgment. The point is the same as in verses 15b–20. There is a redeeming that Yahweh alone can do, but there is also one for which the people themselves are responsible. To put it another way, it is necessary for Zion’s people to be **penitent**. Literally they need to be “turners,” changing their direction and their ways. “Turn/return/repent” is another key prophetic term that makes its first appearance here. On the other hand, **rebels** (see v. 2) **and sinners** (see v. 4) **will both be broken** together. “Breaking” can be an image for military defeat or emotional distress or bodily crippling. Here it points not merely to loss of life but to loss of power, and in part provides the precondition of the restoration of just judgment. “Both . . . together” introduces yet another of the book’s important

terms. It implies suddenness, simultaneity, and thus an extraordinariness that hints at the visible activity of God.

Those who forsake the LORD will perish leads into a coda in verses 29–31 which develops a subordinate theme in the chapter. Judah’s rebellion has generated a broken and unfair society whose structures the powerful could use to crush the weak (vv. 15b–23), but it has also despised, ignored, and broken a family relationship (vv. 2–4). Further, the people have not merely turned from Yahweh but have turned to another direction completely. The “faithful city” has become a “harlot” (v. 21a).

In Isaiah, sometimes Judah’s rebelliousness and faithlessness are expressed in its looking to other human resources of strength (see esp. chs. 30–31). Here, as more often in the prophets, they are expressed in its looking to the resources of another religion. This is the traditional folk religion of Canaan that sought to identify directly with the forces of creation, to be built up by those forces, and to encourage them in their own fruitfulness. The punishment will fit the crime (vv. 29–31). Exposing the folly of their false trust will mean people are **ashamed** and **disgraced** (v. 29). The two words suggest the inner and factual exposure of inadequacy which devastates the person who sees the error that has been committed, as well as the person’s public humiliation and shame before others.

2:1 / In 1:1, the word “vision” drew attention to the revelatory content of what Isaiah was to say about the future. In this companion tailpiece (lit. “the word that Isaiah son of Amoz saw . . .”), “word” draws attention to its verbal form, issuing from Yahweh’s speaking like a judge (1:2, 10, 18, 20), and to the certainty of its effectively implementing what it announces.

Additional Notes §1

1:2–9 / On some of the poetic features of these verses, see the Introduction above.

1:3 / Elsewhere “Israel” is set over against “Judah” as a political term for the northern kingdom (e.g., 7:1), otherwise known as Ephraim, its dominant tribe. Of course the Judeans whom Isaiah addresses are part of the theological Israel. He can even speak of Judah *as* Israel, and some-

times this can be a pointed usage—Judah is the true Israel (see v. 1). We have to judge from contexts which usage applies.

The parallelism between **Israel** and **my people** (v. 3b) shows that here the name “Israel” is used theologically for Yahweh’s people as a whole, as is the name Jacob (e.g., 2:5).

1:24 / **The LORD Almighty** is common in the Prophets, but puzzling. The armies might be those of human nations (see 34:2), but they are more likely heavenly forces (see 13:13; 24:21; 34:4; 40:26; 45:12). The rendering “LORD” avoids the name Yahweh, a foreign-sounding name, but thereby abandons the name God graciously revealed. “Almighty” conveys the idea of “armies,” if in a rather abstract way. In the unique phrase “the Mighty One of Israel,” mighty is a spelling variant for the word that commonly applies to the power of a bull. The variant is doubtless intended to safeguard any misunderstanding when the word is applied to God.

1:25 / **Thoroughly** apparently takes *bor* as the abstract word “cleanness.” It more often means “lye/potash.” It used to be thought that lye/potash was not used for smelting; but see H. Wildberger, *Isaiah 1–12*. ET (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), p. 60.

1:29–30 / Both verses begin with the Hb. word *ki*, which commonly means “for” (as in vv. 2, 20). NIV assumes that in contexts such as this it simply adds emphasis and draws attention to what follows rather than making a link with what precedes. NIV thus also does not translate the word at the beginning of 2:3b, 6 (also in the second line), 12, 22b, 3:1 (and many other passages). The reader might like to look at these verses and see whether “for” makes sense there, as NRSV assumes.

2:1 / The chapter division implies that 2:1 is the preface to what then follows, but there are no further such prefaces and it makes better sense as the tailpiece to chapter 1, pairing with 1:1.

§2 *The Last Days and the Day of Yahweh for Jerusalem (Isa. 2:2–4:6)*

With two visions of Zion/Jerusalem's restoration (1:1–2:1 and 5:1–30) bracketing substantial declarations of coming calamity for Zion/Jerusalem/Judah, chapters 1–5 as a whole have a trouble-promise-trouble-promise-trouble arrangement. Worrisomely, trouble enfolds the community even though blessing is its background destiny. Or, encouragingly, blessing does lie enfolded even if trouble dominates the community's immediate prospects. We do not know the date of any of the material or of the composition of the whole.

2:2–5 / The promise of the exaltation of Zion in verses 2–4 appears in a variant form in Micah 4:1–3. We do not know its actual origin. In both contexts it serves to promise that Yahweh's threat of judgment (Isa. 1; Mic. 1–3) is not the final word.

In the last days is literally "at the close of the days." While the phrase always refers to a special moment when Yahweh's promises come true, it does not have to refer to *the* end. When the "days" are depends on the context. The term generally denotes a period that is one step removed from speaker and audience. Here the first event the prophet announces is Zion's judgment. "At the close of the days [of this judgment]" comes Zion's new exaltation. The transformation that 2:2–5 promises is a further expression and development of that in 1:25b–27.

"In the last days" thus does not specify whether the events it introduces will take weeks, years, or centuries to come. It shares in a pattern that appears throughout Scripture. Zion itself saw some fulfillment of this vision in OT times. It saw further fulfillment through the coming of Jesus and specifically through Pentecost. It still awaits complete fulfillment, as hinted by Romans 11:12.

The original Jerusalem-Zion stood below the height of the country around. While relatively secure, standing on a spur of rock, it was not an impressive sight like (say) Tyre, or even Sa-

maria. Its physical location belied its theological significance as a place that pointed to, reflected, and mediated heaven (Ps. 48:2; 78:69). Even after it expanded to the north and west, it stood below the height of the Mount of Olives to the east. Even northern Israel was physically more significant than Judah and Jerusalem, as was many a Canaanite shrine. Its physical unimpressiveness provides a figure for its lack of international significance or reputation.

The promise that this insignificant spur **will be established as chief among the mountains** (cf. Ezek. 40:2) presumably does not predict a geophysical transformation of the Judean mountain ridge. But that is what happens in this vision, which envisages a time when nations will **stream to it** (v. 2). It does not specify what will draw them. Theologically, the vision restates and applies to Zion the promise that Abram will be so blessed that all peoples will receive the same blessing (Gen. 12:1–3). Reasserting this worldwide vision near the beginning of Isaiah (it will recur at the end, in ch. 66) reminds readers of the context in which Judah lives its life of privilege and responsibility and in which all of prophecy operates, including declarations of calamity for individual nations and for the nations as a whole (chs. 10; 13–27). Judah thus recognizes the universality of Yahweh’s concern. The nations recognize the particularity of Yahweh’s involvement in the world as they speak of **the God of Jacob**.

These peoples **will come** to Yahweh’s mountain, **go up** to it, the technical term for pilgrimage. As would often be the case with Israelite pilgrims, they come to seek guidance from Yahweh, so that **he will teach us his ways, so that we may walk in his paths**. The result (rather than the cause?) of the people’s being drawn to **Zion/Jerusalem** is that *torah*/**the word of the LORD** (see 1:10) will go out from there. Verse 4 suggests it takes the form not of general teaching but of rulings on specific questions that people ask. Yahweh **will settle disputes for many peoples**. Yahweh as king deals with disputes in the manner of the king in 1 Kings 3:16–28.

Paying heed will mean a peace dividend. They will beat their weapons of war into farming implements. Yahweh’s act of destruction (Ps. 46:9) becomes an act of recycling undertaken by the warriors themselves. The finality of such action is underlined: **nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war any more** (v. 4b). Between them, this passage and Joel 3:10 reflect the fact that there is a time for war and a time for peace

(Eccl. 3:8), but that the time of fulfillment is a time of peace rather than of war.

When compared with Micah 4:1–3, the most distinctive feature of Isaiah’s version of this prophecy is the “application” in verse 5. The **house of Jacob** (see on 1:10) is challenged to **walk in the light of the LORD**. If Yahweh is committed to achieving a purpose whereby the nations let their lives be shaped by Yahweh’s teaching, the least Israel can do is let that teaching shape their own lives now. Perhaps they may then be in a position to avoid the trouble that 1:2–31 and 2:6–4:1 otherwise envisage. Or perhaps their letting their lives be thus shaped contributes to the achieving of Yahweh’s purpose. It becomes part of what draws the nations. The image of light can denote truth as opposed to falsehood, but in the OT *Yahweh’s* light suggests not Yahweh’s revelation but Yahweh’s provision or deliverance or Yahweh’s face. The averting of Yahweh’s eyes means loss (1:15), but when Yahweh’s face shines, deliverance blossoms (Ps. 44:3). Walking in Yahweh’s light (v. 5) suggests living by Yahweh’s blessing.

2:6–9 / The address to God in verses 6a (“You have abandoned them”) and 9b (“do not forgive them”) forms a bracket round the description of the community in the rest of verses 6–9, so that throughout these verses the people overhear Isaiah speaking to God about them. The words in verse 6a would have sounded like part of a prayer for Yahweh to return to the people, but this is the first of a number of occasions when the prophet beguiles the people by sounding as if he is speaking in one way in order eventually to say something very different. The two prayers in verses 6a and 9b are a chilling combination. It is up to the people to respond in such a way as to negate the closing request.

One might assume that verse 6a describes and verses 6b–9a indicate the reasons for Yahweh’s abandonment of the people, but the order (first the abandonment, then the wrongdoing) implies the opposite. A comparison with Psalm 94 also suggests that the wrongdoing is actually the result of that abandonment (cf. the argument of Rom. 1). The psalm pictures a community characterized by corruption, oppression, and folly, but it expresses a confidence that Yahweh will take action with regard to this, “for Yahweh will not reject his people” (Ps. 94:14; cf. 1 Sam. 12:22). In contrast Isaiah declares, “for you have rejected your people” (cf. Ps. 27:9; Jer. 12:7). God has given up on them (Wildberger, *Isaiah*

1–12, p. 105). We do not know which historical context provoked this judgment.

The evidence of Yahweh's abandonment includes disapproved religious observances (divination, image-making) and the accumulation of financial and military resources. These are presumably related: all are ways of attempting to safeguard the future by means other than trusting in Yahweh (see 30:16; 31:1, 3; 39:1–8).

2:10–22 / The words about humbling (v. 9a) reappear (vv. 11, 17), as does the talk about silver and gold and images (vv. 7–8, 20). The chiasmic arrangement emphasizes both the action commended at either end and the basis for it all at the center.

- A The action Isaiah commends (v. 10a)
- B The dread of Yahweh and the splendor of Yahweh's majesty (v. 10b)
- C People to be brought low, Yahweh to be exalted (v. 11)
- D Yahweh has a day against . . . (vv. 12–16)
- C' People to be brought low, Yahweh to be exalted (vv. 17–18)
- B' The dread of Yahweh and the splendor of Yahweh's majesty (vv. 19–21)
- A' The action Isaiah commends (v. 22)

Again the section opens and closes with address, but this address is directed to the people. The commands give them little room to maneuver. They are to **hide** from Yahweh (see further vv. 19–21) and to **stop trusting in** human beings with their feebleness (see v. 22). If they are to avoid God and humanity, who is left? As in his prayer in verses 6–9, Isaiah seeks to drive people into a corner. Of course he wants actually not to make them hide from Yahweh but to make them seek Yahweh. Prophets cannot always (usually?) be taken at face value.

The **dread of the LORD and the splendor of his majesty** (v. 10b) recurs at the beginning and end of verses 19–21, and the motif is also developed in between. The dread is not a feeling but an objective dreadfulness, a terrifying awesomeness, parallel to Yahweh's majestic splendor. Both the dread and the splendor are implicit in Yahweh's holiness, Isaiah's key motif. In being put in touch with Yahweh, Judah is in contact with power that has the

capacity to electrocute if mishandled. The dread is a reason to **hide** or **flee**, and also a reason that images in their triviality are destined to be discarded (vv. 18, 20). The majesty and the **exalted-ness** are a reason that what is humanly **lofty** and **exalted** must be put down. By its nature humanity has a tendency to be arrogant and proud (v. 17), though the words Isaiah uses need not imply that this is so. The words for loftiness simply denote exalted height. The mere fact that things are so impressive means that they may seem to rival Yahweh, win excessive regard and trust, and need to be cut down. That applies to human beings and to natural resources (v. 13), impressive religious and urban sites (v. 14), fortifications (v. 15), and humanly-made assets (v. 16)—to all that impresses from Lebanon to the Red Sea.

The words used of Yahweh are words for royal majesty and for secure exalted-ness that imply the capacity to be a defensive refuge (25:12; 26:5; 33:5, 16). Human impressiveness compromises the one, human strength the other. The cutting down will be a feature of Yahweh's **day** (v. 11, 12, 17, 20), the day when Yahweh's ultimate purpose will be fulfilled. It is designed to be a time of glory, light, blessing, deliverance, safety, and renewal, and believers looked forward to it like Christians anticipating the second coming of Christ. But resistance to Yahweh means it becomes a time of humbling, darkness, calamity, defeat, insecurity, and loss, as Christ's coming will be for Christians who have resisted Christ.

3:1–7 / Another solemn designation of God (see 1:24) marks the beginning and end of verses 1–15, and this whole section focuses on the community's leadership and the collapsing structures of the community. A chiasm describes Yahweh's punishment in verses 1–7:

- A Yahweh's power will destroy human confidence and power (v. 1a)
- B (Supplies will run out [v. 1b])
- C The consequences (vv. 2–6)
- B' (Supplies have run out [v. 7a])
- A' Human beings lack the confidence to take power (v. 7b)

The designation of God explains and guarantees punishment beyond that found in 2:10–22, making more down-to-earth the warning about the removal of humanly impressive

leadership—military, legal, religious, moral, practical, and political. There is no suggestion that the leaders have misled the people (as in ch. 1), except by looking like a resource of impressiveness and strength and thereby encouraging the people not to lean on **the Lord, the LORD Almighty** as their **supply and support** (words used elsewhere only of Yahweh, Ps. 18:18). The result will be that the people will be governed by children (v. 4), or by no one at all so that society collapses into disorder (v. 5), or by no one because even the incompetent are unwilling (vv. 6–7). The resourcelessness that verse 7 acknowledges testifies to the vindication of statements in chapter 2 (and the only qualification he needed was a cloak!) and underlines that, in a crisis, the test of leadership is a down-to-earth one.

3:8–12 / In the description of the deeds of the wicked and the reward of the righteous, what seem at first disjointed sayings form another chiasm:

- A Judah, Jerusalem and their deeds (*ma'alelehem*) (v. 8)
- B Alas for those who have earned disaster (*ra', gamal*) (v. 9)
- C Good news for the righteous given their deeds (*ma'alelehem*) (v. 10)
- B' Alas for those whose earning is disaster (*ra', gemul*) (v. 11)
- A' My people, my people and what is done to them (*me'olel*) (v. 12)

Verses 8–9 and 11–12 suggest a horror on the part of the prophet both at the visionary **Jerusalem/Judah** and at the actual city and country. Calamity has been happening before Isaiah's eyes. **Staggers** involves collapsing in ruins (the same word as v. 6), but both this and **is falling** suggest a drunk, perhaps someone who has drunk a glass of Yahweh's anger. The verbs are past tense, like **they have brought disaster on themselves**, as if they describe events that have already taken place, though in verse 11 a more literal future tense appears. Isaiah also sees the people as they literally are now, in word and deed blatantly **defying** (the word translated **rebel** in 1:20) God's **glorious presence** (literally "eyes"), and with their own **faces** looking brazen **like Sodom** (see 1:10).

Yet it is not true, or need not be true, of all of the people. At the heart of the section, in between the woes, Isaiah declares that

the righteous will have their just reward (v. 10). Their **deeds** are very different from the deeds of the community as a whole (v. 8). He does not use “remnant” language, but he presupposes what would become another way of thinking about a remnant (see on 10:20–21). The remnant is a small minority accepting a call to faithfulness when most fall from it. This is the first indication that there is such a group within the community.

At the end we might expect the prophet to return to the visionary Jerusalem, and **youths oppress my people, women rule over them** (v. 12a) could at first be read that way (cf. v. 4). As usual, nothing can be taken for granted—and verse 12b reveals that it comprises a dismissive assessment of the people’s actual present leadership, its **guides** who **lead astray** and **turn from the path**. In this way the section comes to a scathing climax that gives it its concrete link with the theme of leadership that holds together the three sections of verses 1–15. The people need to recognize their leaders for what they are. They also need to be prepared either to turn as a community from the attitudes expressed by verses 8–9 or to stand out individually in the way verse 10 envisages, if they are to evade imminent disaster. There is no mention of God’s activity here. Wrongdoing and righteousness bring their “natural” fruit in disaster and blessing, though of course God is behind this (v. 1; also 9:18–21).

3:13–15 / Yahweh now declares judgment. Christian theology uses “judgment” as a default model for God’s bringing trouble in response to wrongdoing. In the OT, the image of people as guilty and being judged is less common than that of people as (say) a disobedient child being chastised or a resistant student being punished or a faithless spouse being attacked or divorced. But here, in the strict sense Yahweh indeed **enters into judgment**, though this is no routine figure of speech. As usual the prophet keeps his hearers on their toes. He pictures Yahweh standing up to declare judgment on “peoples” (v. 13, NRSV), which might seem good news to Judah if it meant judgment on its enemies, or even judgment *for* them in the sense envisaged by 2:2–4. But suddenly the spotlight returns to **his people** and its **elders** and **leaders** (v. 14), and Isaiah announces a motif that will be developed in chapter 5, Yahweh’s **vineyard**. So on one side are “peoples” and Judah’s elders/leaders, who are brought into association as objects of Yahweh’s judgment, perhaps even identified with each other. On the other side are his people/my vineyard/**my people**

and **the poor** or powerless or afflicted or bowed down (*'ani*; vv. 14b, 15) who are also brought into association, perhaps even identified with each other. In 14:32 Yahweh's people as a whole are designated the "poor" (NIV afflicted) over against the nations, finding refuge in Zion. Here Judah is divided between the leadership that is associated with the nations, and the powerless to whom the title "his people" is confined. Revolutionarily, the identity of his people is thus redefined. It is a question not of where you are born but of your place in the power structure. Yahweh divides the leaders and people according to the way the former treated the latter. The leaders treated the people as if they did not belong. As a result, the leaders have lost their own belonging. The leaders have **ruined**, better "devoured" (NRSV), so that the **plunder is in your houses** (v. 14). To that end they have been **crushing** and **grinding** (v. 15) as if the poor were themselves grain. Once again the solemnity of **the Lord, the LORD Almighty** undergirds Yahweh's oracle, drawing verses 13–15 to a close, as well as concluding the larger section (vv. 1–15).

3:16–4:1 / The women of Jerusalem will also experience their fall from exaltation to shame. In a patriarchal society, men have to be leaders and women have to look nice. Feminine beauty is an alternative way of being exalted (**haughty** is a variant on words translated "lofty" in 2:15 and "arrogant/arrogance" in 2:11, 17; see also 5:15–16). So the women of Zion have to be taken from majesty to humiliation, like the community in general (but perhaps the men in particular) in 2:10–22. The beginning and end of 3:16–4:1 mark the two extremes of this journey. There are two facets to the women's fall. Most of the comment centers on the loss of their fine looks, jewelry, fine clothes, make-up, and accessories. Haute couture gives way to the appearance of a victim or a prisoner of war.

The other facet to their fall is the disappearance of the men upon whom patriarchy requires them to depend. The city itself will mourn their disappearance (vv. 25–26). Even if they can provide their own livelihood (cf. the earlier reference to the men's inability to provide food and clothing in v. 7), they have no place in society unless they are attached to a man (4:1).

4:2–6 / **In that day** has been a worrying phrase in 3:7, 18; 4:1, but this time it heralds the promise that calamity is not Yahweh's last word. At point after point, these verses take up the

motifs of 2:6–4:1 and promise reversal. Zion's beauty and security will be restored.

Talk of **the Branch of the LORD** recalls the picture of a tree that has been felled (2:13) or of Yahweh's people as a vineyard that has been devoured (3:14; see later 5:1–7; 6:13). The tree will flourish and produce its fruit again. In other words, the people will flourish once more (see 37:31–32). Thus **the survivors in Israel** will receive replacements for the splendor, exaltedness, and attractiveness that they are destined to lose (2:10–22; 3:16–24). "Survivors," literally "a people who escaped," is another term for the remnant (1:8–9; cf. 10:20; 37:31–32). The notion of a remnant of cloth or carpet left over when the main pieces have been sold gives just the right impression for the idea of **those who are left**. The same applies to **who remain** (translated "left" in 1:8–9; see comment).

The splendor of the leftovers is that they **will be called holy** (cf. 6:13). The holiness that attaches to Yahweh by nature (see on 1:4) attaches to Israel by association (only here is the adjective so used in Isaiah). They are **recorded among the living in Jerusalem**. They do more than merely survive to appear in a political citizen-list. They appear in the book of life or the book of the living, God's book (see Exod. 32:32; Ps. 69:28). They are invited to see God's sovereignty in their survival, another building block for the notion of a remnant.

The **women of Zion** will also be restored, for Yahweh **will wash away** the dirt of their humiliation (v. 4; cf. 3:17, 24) and/or the dirt of their own sin. Yahweh's sovereignty is involved in this washing, too, and the promise that Yahweh will also **cleanse the bloodstains from Jerusalem** contrasts with the earlier demand for human action in 1:15–18. Yet this is no reversion to cheap grace. Renewal involves a white-hot purging **by a spirit of judgment** (see on 1:21) and of **fire** (see 1:25, 31). This first occurrence of **spirit** in Isaiah well illustrates the Hebrew word's capacity to move between spirit, wind, and breath, to bring disaster as well as renewal (see 30:28; 40:7).

In seeking to stand on high as Yahweh does (2:10–22), people evade any need for other security. This security is therefore removed and they have to seek some other hiding place (not least from Yahweh). In assembling for worship people avoid righting their lives in society, so that assembling is resented (1:12). Now Yahweh provides Zion and its assembled worshipers with a comprehensive security and hiding place: **cloud of smoke** and

glow of flaming fire as at the exodus, and **canopy** to be both umbrella and parasol (vv. 5–6). People who can find no refuge from oppression or from disaster find it here.

Additional Notes §2

2:6 / **They are full of superstitions from the East:** “of superstitions” is an addition by NIV. In MT, vv. 7–9a will reveal the two sides to what the people are full of (accumulation of resources and disapproved religious practices). V. 6 goes on “and soothsayers like the Philistines, and with the children of foreigners they slap [hands].” These might be the first announcements of the themes of disapproved religious practices and accumulation of resources, if that last clause had a commercial significance (as in Prov. 6:1), but that is guesswork. The hand gesture might as easily be a religious act, to ward off something.

2:9 / So people **will be brought low and everyone humbled.** The verbs are past tense. Prophecies can be put in the past tense because they are “as good as fulfilled,” but these past verbs follow a string of “genuine” past verbs describing the consequences of Yahweh’s abandonment, and they more likely continue that description. Cf. NRSV: “So people are humbled, and everyone is brought low.” V. 9a then continues v. 8, and vv. 7 and 8–9a balance each other in content and length. The human humiliation lies in bowing to things they have created.

Forgive and **raise** (NIV mg.) are both possible meanings of *nasa’*. The latter fits the context better (see v. 12b), but one would expect a different verb form (the piel) to convey this meaning.

2:11 / **The eyes of the arrogant:** lit. “the eyes of exaltedness of a human being,” perhaps “exalted human appearances/opinions/presence.” The word for “eyes” is rendered **presence** in 3:8.

3:9 / **Look** (*hakkarah*) occurs only here. What the look signifies is unclear; RSV guesses “partiality,” but brazenness fits the context.

3:16 / **Flirting** is an interpretation; the word simply means “looking about.”

4:2 / Elsewhere **the Branch of the LORD** could be a future Davidic king (see 11:1), but the context here offers no hint in this direction. Elsewhere **the fruit of the land** would simply denote what the land makes grow, but the “Branch of the LORD” is hardly a way of simply referring to “what Yahweh makes grow,” and 37:31–32 speaks in similar terms of the regrowing people as fruit.

4:3 / **Those who are left** is from the same root as the eventual technical term for the remnant. For the noun, cf. 7:3 (see NIV mg.); 10:19–22; 11:11, 16, and for the verb, 11:11, 16; 37:31.

§3 Judgment Missed and Demonstrated (Isa. 5:1–30)

In length and theme chapter 5 pairs with chapter 1 and closes a bracket around 2:2–4:6. Chapter 5 comprises a mock love song; a series of woes that will be completed in 10:1–4; and a warning about Yahweh’s outstretched hand that will continue in chapter 9. In contrast to 1:1–2:1 and 2:2–4:6, no positive note is struck at the beginning or the end. Chapters 1–5 come to a close as bleak as their opening. Rebellion and darkness ultimately bracket them.

5:1–7 / The chapter opens with a lament for a disappointing vineyard. The readers of this book can easily work out what this vineyard stands for (see 3:14; also Ps. 80). For the original audience of Isaiah’s song, matters were more complicated. Cultivating a vineyard can be an image for courting someone (see Song 2:15; 7:8–9, 12; 8:11–12). Isaiah appears before his audience as a minstrel singing a love song on behalf of his best friend, perhaps as his best man. It appears at first to be a touching song about the man’s efforts to cultivate a fruitful relationship or a fruitful marriage, yet worryingly its lines have the short second half characteristic of the limping lament form, which suggests that it will turn out to be a sad song.

The effort involved in cultivation is considerable, to judge from the analogy. There are many stones on the average Palestinian hillside, and the farmer has no mechanized equipment. Turning these into a wall to keep animals out, and into a permanent watchtower (see 1:8) requires much effort. Constructing a winepress, which is two linked vats of stone, wood, or clay, one for pressing the juice out of the grapes, the lower one for letting the juice settle, involves further labor. Then the farmer must wait two years for the first grapes.

At the end of verse 2 the love song turns overtly into a blues. The grapes are small and sour instead of large and full of juice.

The beloved has turned against Isaiah's friend. The poetic intensity increases as the lines of verse become longer through verses 4–6, mirroring the overflowing indignation of poet and lover. If one may see the lament meter itself as blues-like, in this sense verses 4–6 are less like a blues. As Isaiah (or rather the suitor/vinedresser himself) asks what should happen now, a modern audience, at least, begins to feel uneasy and embarrassed. Is the woman not free to resist this man's pressing advances? What is the wife's side of the story? And is there more to this song than meets the ear? Or does the average man who has been disappointed in love identify closely with the instinct for violent vengeance expressed in the declarations of excessive intent in verses 5–6? Who can issue commands to the rain clouds? What is going on?

All becomes clear in verse 7. The song was one about the relationship between Yahweh and Israel/Judah. To the metaphorical lament in verses 1–6 is added a double paronomasia: **He looked for justice** (*mishpat*), **but saw bloodshed** (*mishpakh*); **for righteousness** (*tsedaqah*), **but heard cries of distress** (*tse'aqah*; see 1:21 on the pairing of justice and righteousness). The proximity of the words and the similarity of sounds belie the distance between what they refer to and the distance between hope and reality. The men who identified with the man's desire for vengeance have signed the warrant for vengeance on themselves, like David in his judgment in 2 Samuel 12 (Oswalt, *Isaiah 1–39*, p. 151). The technique is one Jesus takes up in his parables, as is the vineyard theme. Jesus' parables will also imitate Isaiah's technique whereby the prophet then leaves the hearers to work out the implications for themselves.

5:8–24 / In the context, these six **woes** (number seven comes in 10:1–4) and their two *therefores* interpret the bad grapes and the wasting of the vineyard.

In the first woe, accumulated property and land will become desolate and fruitless (vv. 8–10). The objection here is neither to the immoral means of the acquisition nor to the contravention of the principle that land cannot be bought because it belongs to Yahweh and/or to the family to whom it is allocated (Lev. 25:23; 1 Kgs. 21). Rather, the problem is the self-indulgence involved in the acquisition, as people (stupidly) create for themselves lonely estates around lonely property instead of gladly sharing with others.

The second woe declares that for nobles and for ordinary people, drinking and entertainment will become starvation, thirst,

and exile (which will presumably also be the means of bringing the desolation of vv. 9–10 as the owners are cast out of the land they have monopolized). They will suffer starvation and thirst (vv. 11–13). The objection here is to the way these preoccupations divert people from paying attention to what God is doing (see 1:3). While Isaiah might imply that the masses pay the penalty for the indulgence of the rich, it is more natural to read verses 13–14 as implying that the masses share in the indulgence and in the calamity. Drink is, in any case, commonly a recourse of the poor as well as of the rich.

A more extensive warning (**therefore**) sets these two woes in a broader context (vv. 14–17). In theme, verse 14 links with the second woe and warns not merely about the fact of death but about the nature of it. **Sheol** (NIV mg.) is the home of dead people in general. It is an underground home for people's personalities that is equivalent to the one the grave provides for their bodies, and, like the grave, it is a corporate one. Sometimes in Middle Eastern thinking Death was an individual deity. Here it is simply personified as a person whose appetite matches the revellers' but exceeds it in danger. In turn, verse 17 links with the first woe and pictures animals able to enjoy the fruits of the land's desolation.

In between (vv. 15–16), the theme reverts to one that dominated chapters 2–3, but adds a crucial new statement. God's holiness is God's majestic, extraordinary, supernatural almightiness, so the parallel of **holy** with **exalted** is intelligible enough. Here Isaiah tells us how **holy** becomes an ethical term and not merely a metaphysical one. He associates it with the key word-pair from the climax of the vineyard song. By nature Yahweh is a just God. It is in manifesting **righteousness** (*tsedaqah*) that Yahweh's deity or holiness reveals itself as deity or holiness. This is another way of saying that Yahweh Almighty is exalted in **justice** (*mishpat*). To put the two sayings together, it is in just judgment that the Almighty, holy Yahweh is revealed and exalted as the holy one.

The second sequence of woes works differently. They simply describe the wrongdoers—implicitly the people's leadership. In the third woe, the people pull punishment along as they scornfully invite God to hurry along the plan that the holy one is allegedly pursuing. Their comment on God's **work** takes up and justifies Isaiah's earlier observation about their disregard for it (v. 12), and their chilling taunt about **the Holy One of Israel** resonates with Isaiah's subsequent comment on who this God is (v. 16). One need not suppose that people literally said the words

in verse 19 (and suppose that this lets readers off the hook if they can claim not to do so). Isaiah is inclined to put on people's lips the implications of their words (see 28:15).

This scorn involves denying the reality of the crisis that confronts the community, saying things are going well when they are on the way to disaster (v. 20). Even in English, **bitter/sweet** sounds like a reference to suffering/blessing rather than to wrong/right. In Hebrew this is also the natural way to understand **evil/good** and **darkness/light** (cf. v. 30).

This delusion in turn involves living by their own definitions of insight (v. 21). Isaiah offers the first of many critiques of the so-called wisdom that effectively excludes God, though formally it will not have done so. Paradoxically (or not), the woes' concerns parallel those of Proverbs. Far from being against learning, Isaiah includes it, but with God as part of the picture (e.g., 28:23–29; see, e.g., Whedbee, *Isaiah and Wisdom*, pp. 105–7).

Behind all this (see vv. 11–13) is their combining self-indulgence with perversion of justice (vv. 22–23). “Here are pictured the great men of the nation, who are only great behind a bar” (Oswalt, *Isaiah 1–39*, p. 165).

Their judgment comes in another **Therefore**. Again it combines vivid pictures (v. 24a) with a powerful statement about **the Lord Almighty . . . the Holy One** (v. 24b). The fact that people have **rejected/spurned** God's *torah/word* (again *torah* will include prophetic teaching) means they are bound to be called to account.

Both series of woes refer to God's **work** or **plan**, which Isaiah later calls “his work, his strange work . . . his task, his alien task” (28:21). Yahweh's work/task is to bring destruction on Judah (see 10:12). While this task is clearly alien to Yahweh's ultimate nature and purpose, it will be done if necessary as a means to that purpose's fulfillment. It is not just wanton destructiveness or fickleness. It is all part of a sensible plan (28:29, NIV “counsel”). Yahweh's positive plan for Israel stands (46:10, NIV “purpose”). Thus Yahweh does not need anyone to offer advice on planning (40:13, NIV “counselor”), and is even able to use foreign generals in this connection (46:11, NIV “purpose”). After being the means of Yahweh's completing his strange work, Assyria is destined by Yahweh's plan to be crushed (14:26; cf. 19:17), but in that ultimate purpose Assyria is itself Yahweh's work (19:25), destined for Yahweh's blessing, as much as Israel is (29:23; 60:21; 64:8). In general, *purpose* is a better translation than *plan*. The latter can give the impression that everything happens as an outworking of a detailed

plan of action devised by God centuries beforehand. The OT gives the impression that through (or despite) human actions God always achieves the final purpose determined from before creation. The details of how Israel and the world in general work out that purpose is, however, determined more by human will than by God's plan.

5:25–30 / **Therefore** in verse 25 is a different word from that in verses 13, 14, and 24. It introduces a different theme, that of Yahweh's **anger**. In the context, this anger expressed in destructiveness further interprets the farmer/lover's reaction to his fruitless vineyard/courtship. The anger is expressed via an unnamed army whom Yahweh summons like a general or whistles for like a bee-keeper (see 7:18). Verses 26–30 vividly describe its advance. In the historical context, this is the invading Assyrians (see 10:5–19; 36:1–37:38). Although they do not know it, they are Yahweh's handiwork and agents of Yahweh's purpose (see comments on vv. 8–24). As 5:8–24 will be completed in 10:1–4, so 5:25–30 will be continued in 9:8–10:4. But one of the effects of separating verses 25–30 from what comes later is to make it easy to generalize. This army stands for the armies of all the distant nations that are from time to time summoned to Yahweh's angry purpose.

Anger (*'af*) is the word for nose (cf. our "snorting with anger"). This is thus a fiery and felt wrath, not a cool and unemotional one. Yahweh's anger is relentless (here), violent (10:5), destructive (10:25), fierce (13:9), burning (13:13), aggressive (14:6), raging (30:30), and bloody (63:3), but not unlimited (12:1) or pre-determined (48:9). It is sometimes paired with *za'am* (10:5, 25; 30:27) which suggests indignant cursing, with *kemah* (42:25; 63:3; 66:15) which indicates burning rage, and with *'ebrah* (13:9; 14:6) which implies an overflowing outburst. Anger is an aspect of the passion of Yahweh, who is a real person with all the feelings that a human being has—from yearning love (vv. 1–4) to fierce wrath. To put it another way, believing that human beings are made in the image of deity, Middle Eastern peoples do not hesitate to attribute all the facets of human personality to deity. Unlike human passion and the passion of some Middle Eastern deities, however, Yahweh's passion is one with justice and is harnessed to the implementation of justice.

Additional Notes §3

5:8–24 / The translation **woe** may give the wrong impression; *hoy* is a cry or exclamation (NRSV “Ah”) that expresses a reaction to appalling wrong or suffering (see 1:4). Whereas the first woe is expressed as an oath by Yahweh about the future, the second is mostly expressed in further already-as-good-as-here past tenses, lit. “they have gone into exile. . . . Sheol has enlarged its appetite. . . . People have been brought low. . . . Yahweh Almighty has been exalted. . . .” This might even signify that the events have taken place and that these prophecies give an explanation of them. Certainly these texts would function to give such account once the events they describe had taken place.

5:16 / **His justice . . . his righteousness:** there is no “his” on either word in the Hb. Justice and righteousness are here seen as realities or absolutes in their own right that Yahweh makes a point of embodying. They are realities to which Yahweh accepts responsibility: cf. Abraham’s challenge to Yahweh in Gen. 18.

5:18 / Hb. *’awon* covers iniquity (53:5, 6, 11; 57:17 [KJV]; 59:2, 12), the guilt that follows (1:4; 6:7; 27:9; 59:3), and also the consequent punishment (e.g., Gen. 4:13; Lam. 4:6, 22). Etymologically, *’awon* perhaps suggests wandering out of the right way (see BDB), with a hint of perversity, but we do not know whether prophet and audience were aware of this. Hb. *khatta’ah* and related words cover **sin** (e.g., 1:18; 3:9; 6:7; and see on 1:28), the guilt that follows (e.g., Deut. 15:9; 24:15), and the consequent punishment (e.g., Zech. 14:19; Lam. 3:39). It can also refer to the sin offering (e.g., Ps. 40:6). “Pulling *’awon/khatta’ah* along” might in isolation imply multiplying and encouraging iniquity/sin, perhaps with the implication that it is nevertheless a burden, but v. 19 suggests that the idea is rather of multiplying *guilt* and *punishment*. **Cords of deceit** are making people unaware that they are doing this, that in scornfully hurrying Yahweh (v. 19) they are fatally building up their own guilt and hurrying their own punishment.

5:25–30 / Again, past tense verbs in vv. 25, 28 (see NRSV) interweave with “imperfect” verbs that point more to literal future. The combination suggests both the fact of futureness and the vividness of something as good as actual. Isa. 9:8–21 will link in theme and structure with 5:25–30 (and 10:1–4 with 5:8–24). This encourages us to read these two passages in association with those later ones. But the actual arrangement in the book does encourage us to associate 5:8–24 with 5:25–30, and this puts the “Therefore” in v. 24 (*laken*) and the different “Therefore” in v. 25 (*’al-ken*) next to each other. NIV encourages this association by leaving no space between vv. 24 and 25. The rejection in v. 24 becomes the reason for the anger in v. 25.

**§4 Isaiah's Commission: To Stop People Hearing
(Isa. 6:1–13)**

The fact that this testimony comes here rather than as chapter 1 further reflects the fact that the book called Isaiah is arranged logically rather than chronologically. Chapter 6 takes up many of the motifs in chapters 1–5. It also opens a section of the book in which narrative is more dominant (6:1–9:7) and that stands at the center of chapters 1–12 as a whole. Yahweh's holiness and the implications of that holiness are of key importance to the chapter.

6:1–4 / Uzziah/Azariah died between 742 and 735 B.C. after an outstanding, prosperous 52-year reign and a period of co-regency with his son Jotham (2 Kgs. 15:5) but leaving Assyrian storm clouds on the horizon. Here Isaiah sees the *real Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted*, king and sovereign of the whole of heaven and earth, the King, the LORD Almighty (v. 5). Three times Isaiah calls Yahweh "Lord," Sovereign. The contrast between the limitlessness of Yahweh's reign and the limitations of the earthly king's reign might serve as reassurance at a time of transition. It will transpire that the message is less comforting. Isaiah is apparently in the temple, perhaps having gone there to seek God, or present for a "routine" occasion of worship, or for a great festival when Judah celebrated the kingship of the holy God over its own life and over the whole world, and recommitted itself to being Yahweh's subjects (see, e.g., Ps. 98; 99). In the temple, the symbolism of worship with the incense swirling becomes a vision of the reality the symbolism pointed to.

Yahweh is the human king writ large, sitting in his palace (the secular meaning of the word **temple**), exalted on his throne above the level of mere subjects, arrayed in robes of state, flanked by adulatory attendants (we know nothing of the seraphim's appearance), and possessing the power and authority to make his kingship more than the mere constitutional monarchy of a modern European democracy. The entire forces of the cosmos are

at this real King's disposal. Regardless of what is happening to the human monarchy, it is this monarch who counts. Isaiah sees Yahweh awesome in royal honor and splendor (see, e.g., Ps. 97). That **glory** is the outward manifestation of Yahweh's being **holy** (see on 1:4). While the threefold **holy** compares with the threefold acknowledgment of God's holiness in worship in Psalm 99:3, 5, 9, three occurrences of "holy" compare with the twofold repetition elsewhere in Isaiah (e.g., 40:1; and see on 26:3). Only here in Isaiah is a word repeated three times, such is the emphasis it needs (but see Jer. 7:4; 22:29). It is presumably the vision of Yahweh's triple holiness and exaltedness that generates Isaiah's adoption of "the Holy One of Israel" (see on 1:4) as his distinctive title for God, as well as his emphasis on the exaltedness of this holy one (e.g., 2:6–22; 5:15–16).

6:5 / Holiness also means purity. Yahweh's holiness could make a mere creature simply draw back. But because of who Yahweh is, holiness comes to have moral connotations (see on 5:16). Isaiah draws back from God's holiness not just because of God's awesome splendor and his own creatureliness. He also draws back because God is just and righteous and he and his people are polluted (*tame'*), like the king who died that year (2 Kgs. 15:5). They do not fulfill the demands of Psalm 24. The fact that his lips were the part of his person especially involved in serving God as a prophet may lie behind his linking pollution with his lips. But he links his pollutedness with his people's, suggesting that he is identifying the pollution of his lips with Judah's. He has already referred to a number of the wrongs of their lips (e.g., 1:15, 23; 2:6; 3:8; 5:19, 20, 24). In the context of worship, the first of these (1:15) would have been especially relevant. Whichever it is, Isaiah finds that a vision of the holy God shuts the mouth.

6:6–7 / Isaiah's instinct to infer that holiness will be the end of him turns out to be mistaken. He also learns that holiness can mean forgiveness. In keeping with his stress on fire as a means of judging/purging (1:25; 4:4), a coal from the incense altar touches the part of Isaiah's body that he recognized to be the place of pollution (cf. Num. 16:46–47). The high and lofty One (the same phrase as in v. 1) dwells in a high and holy place, but also with those who are crushed and lowly in spirit (57:15). Merciful grace belongs as much to the essence of God's holiness as justice and purity. Once more, a return to Yahweh is not the only requirement for a restored relationship with Yahweh, as chapter 1 might have

seemed to imply (**guilt/sin** recur from 1:4). People who do nothing and presume on God's forgiveness indeed fail to experience it; those who acknowledge the justice of God's judgment and turn from the ways that earned it can escape it.

The sign of cleansing that Isaiah receives is absurdly inadequate. How could being touched with a coal effect this sort of purification? The insufficiency of the sign highlights the fact that the cleansing originates within the person of the holy God. Sacramental rites such as this are the means by which Yahweh incarnates grace to humankind.

6:8–10 / It now becomes clear that holiness does mean judgment. Even if no specific pollution attached to Isaiah's lips, if he is to function as a prophet there is a special appropriateness about his having his lips cleansed so that he can use them in God's service. The image of Yahweh sending someone as messenger presupposes the model of Yahweh as the King surrounded by his court or cabinet. Usually it is permanent members of this cabinet that Yahweh sends to announce or execute the cabinet's decisions (e.g., 1 Kgs. 22:19–23), and there is no presumption that Yahweh's question in verse 8 expects a response from a mere human would-be aide. Whereas the accounts of Moses' and Jeremiah's commissioning stress their hesitation, Isaiah (like Ezekiel) is at the other extreme. He volunteers. A prophet is a human person who is admitted to Yahweh's cabinet and thus becomes another means of executing heaven's decisions on earth and a transmitter of messages between earth and heaven. This works both ways, for the prophet intercedes in the cabinet, speaking on earth's behalf there, as well as bringing announcements of heaven's decisions to earth.

It is a somber commission Yahweh then gives to Isaiah. Isaiah 6:1–8 is commonly read independently of what follows, simply as an instructive account of God's call. This ignores where verses 1–8 lead. Like the story of Elijah hearing the gentle whisper (1 Kgs. 19:12), the chapter is about the way God implements judgment. Indeed, every account of a prophet's call has this focus. Perhaps God hardly has need to call someone in this way for an ordinary, more pastoral ministry. Chapter 6 introduces 6:1–9:7, which functions as an explanation why people should take God's word seriously. This is so with other accounts of the call of prophets, such as those of Jeremiah and Ezekiel, though it is especially clear in the account of Amos's call (Amos 7:10–17). The content of

the message of these prophets meant that it was not welcome, and people would be inclined not to believe that it came from God. The prophet therefore told of his call as one way of trying to get people to listen to his word. Thus the experience of a call is not something that other people would expect to have in common with a prophet. It is what makes a prophet different. The account of a call invites readers to see themselves not as prophets, called the way God called Isaiah, but rather as the audience of prophecy.

What then happens to them when they read on is frightening. Yahweh sends Isaiah to tell people that God is closing their minds (vv. 9–10). They have reached the point when God’s judgment must fall, and the closing of their minds is the form this judgment will take. After all, they are willfully closing their own minds, actively or indirectly (e.g., 1:4; 5:12–13, 19–21). As a judgment Yahweh wills that the natural result should follow. They are closing their minds, and God will let that have its natural effect. They will become unable to realize what God is doing with them. Nevertheless, the words in verses 9 and 10 may be ironic. They constitute a warning of where the people will find themselves unless they respond and turn. Isaiah says **Be ever hearing, but never understanding** (v. 9), but he does not mean it. His preaching of judgment resembles Jonah’s in Nineveh. It is designed to bring people to their senses, to repentance, and to forgiveness, even though it does not explicitly urge them to repentance and indicate that there is any way out. Isaiah will urge them to turn and will not merely repeat what 6:9–10 literally says, but he will meet a response that supports its truth (see ch. 7).

6:11–13 / Even if judgment is inevitable, that is not the end of the story, for holiness also means faithfulness. **For how long** is the question that often appears in the Psalms, not as a request for information, but as a plea for mercy. Initially Isaiah receives only a somber reiteration of how devastating the judgment must be. This reaffirms earlier declarations (e.g., 1:7–9, 29–31; 2:12–13; 5:5–6, 9, 13, 17) and provides part of the justification for his delivering his subsequent tough message (e.g., 7:17–25). Soon, in 721 B.C., the capital of the northern kingdom, Samaria, will fall to the Assyrians. The decimation of Yahweh’s people as a whole when that happens could make Judah feel self-congratulatory. Even that is not the end (v. 13a). But this is not all Isaiah receives. Like the prophet, the people will find that God’s holiness has room for mercy, which they will experience after the most horrifying

devastation if not before it. Even the felled tree can grow again. They were once a brood (*zera'*, lit. “seed”) of evildoers (1:4). Now they are (literally) “a seed of holiness,” who are promised that they **will be the stump in the land** that can become a tree again (v. 13b; cf. 62:12). Despite the nightmare prospect set up by 5:1–7, their once-for-all association with Yahweh means (as a particular sign of Yahweh’s mercy) that the word holy indeed applies to them, too (cf. 4:3). This tree will not be finally uprooted. Yahweh’s promise will be taken further in 11:1–12:6.

Additional Notes §4

6:2 / They covered their **faces** so that they would not look at God (despite the sense in which Isaiah himself did) and covered their **feet** for modesty (if this is a euphemism for genitals).

6:8 / **For us:** presumably the heavenly court (see 1 Kgs. 22).

6:9–10 / NIV mg. notes that the LXX renders this as a prediction rather than a statement of the intention of Isaiah’s ministry (when Jesus repeats these words, Mark 4 gives a version like the Hb., while Matt. 13 gives one like LXX). This becomes in effect God’s intention insofar as God still sends Isaiah. It has thus been suggested that Isaiah wrote the account of his call in light of how things turned out, and that in reality it was only after the event that he saw that this was what he had been called to. It has also been suggested that God indeed revealed that this was what Isaiah was being called to, so that when it turned out thus, Isaiah would not be overwhelmed by his failure. Such theories reflect the sense of scandal interpreters feel at Isaiah’s words, but they start from a problem Isaiah evidently did not sense himself.

6:13 / **So the holy seed will be the stump in the land:** lit., “the holy seed [is] its stump” or “its stump [is] the holy seed,” interprets the word **stump** (actually singular) in the previous line. “So” and “in the land” are NIV interpretations.