ISAIAH

– VOLUME ONE –

A Mentor Commentary

Paul House

MENTOR

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Contents

Dedicated to:

Elizabeth Baker
Grant Taylor
Caleb Spence
Eleanor Spence
Veronica Spence

(Isaiah 65:17-25)

Acknowledgments

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Isaiah lived fruitfully while looking to a glorious future. As I look ahead, I am happy that two former associates of

mine who helped significantly with this commentary are now pursuing higher callings. Elizabeth Baker worked with me for six years, and now, with her husband, Chris, and their children serves as a missionary in Madagascar. Grant Taylor worked with me for two years. He is now my supervisor as Associate Dean of Beeson Divinity School, which should indicate how long it took me to complete this commentary. I am also glad that my three grandchildren, Caleb, Eleanor, and Veronica, arrived while this project was in process. I dedicate this commentary to these five young people.

For these and other kindnesses I am very grateful.

Paul House
Easter 2018

Technical Abbreviations

c.	circa
cf. [Latin]	*confer,* compare
ch(s).	chapter(s)
ed(s).	editor(s); edition
e.g.	*exempli gratia,* for example
ESV	English Standard Version
ET	English translation
et al.	*et alii,* and others
etc.	*et cetera,* and so forth, and the rest
f(f).	and the following one(s)
fn	footnote
i.e.	*id est,* that is
ibid.	*ibidem,* in the same place
JPS	Jewish Publication Society Version
KJV	King James Version
lit.	literally
LXX	Septuagint (the Greek Old Testament)

MT	Masoretic Text (of the Hebrew Bible)
NASB	New American Standard Bible
NIV	New International Version
NT	New Testament
OT	Old Testament
pt.	part
repr.	Reprinted
RSV	Revised Standard Version
v(v).	verse(s)
vol(s).	volume(s)
vs.	versus

Abbreviations for Secondary Sources

AB	Anchor Bible
AJSL	*American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literatures*
ANET	*Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament.* Edited by James B. Pritchard. 3rd ed. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969
ApOTC	Apollos Old Testament Commentary
ARAB	*Ancient Records of Assyria and Babylonia.* Edited by Daniel David Luckenbill. 2 vols. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1926–1927. Repr., New York: Greenwood, 1968
BASOR	*Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research*
BDB	Brown, Francis, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs. *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament.* 1907. Repr., Oxford, England: Clarendon, 1962.
BETL	Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium
Bib	Biblica
CAH	Cambridge Ancient History
CC	Continental Commentaries

ConBOT	Coniectanea Biblica: Old Testament Series
ConcC	Concordia Commentary
CTR	*Criswell Theological Review*
DCH	*Dictionary of Classical Hebrew.* Edited by David J. A. Clines. 9 vols. Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 1993–2014
ECC	Eerdmans Critical Commentary
ExpTim	*Expository Times*
FAT	Forschungen zum Alten Testament
FOTL	Forms of the Old Testament Literature
HALOT	*The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament, Study Edition*. Ludwig Koehler, Walter Baumgartner, and Johann J. Stamm. Translated and edited under the supervision of Mervyn E. J. Richardson. 2 vols. Leiden: Brill, 2001
HCOT	Historical Commentary on the Old Testament
HTR	*Harvard Theological Review*
HUCA	*Hebrew Union College Annual*
ICC	International Critical Commentary
IBC	Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching
JBL	*Journal of Biblical Literature*
JETS	*Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*
JSOTSup	Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series
LHBOTS	The Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies
NAC	New American Commentary
NCB	New Century Bible
NIBCOT	New International Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament

NICNT	New International Commentary on the New Testament
NICOT	New International Commentary on the Old Testament
NSBT	New Studies in Biblical Theology
OBT	Overtures to Biblical Theology
OTL	Old Testament Library
RevQ	*Revue de Qumran*
RINAP	Royal Inscriptions of the Neo-Assyrian Period
SAA	State Archives of Assyria
SBET	*Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology*
SBJT	*Southern Baptist Journal of Theology*
SBLDS	Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series
SBLMS	Society of Biblical Literature Monograph Series
TOTC	Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries
UUA	Uppsala Universitetsårskrift
VT	*Vetus Testamentum*
VTSup	Supplements to Vetus Testamentum
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary
WMANT	Wissenschaftliche Monoraphien zum Alten und Neuen Testament
WTJ	*Westminster Theological Journal*
ZAW	*Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft*

Approximate Dates of Key Historical Events Related to the Book of Isaiah

745–740 (Isaiah 1–4)

- Last years of Uzziah-Jotham co-regency (750–740) in Judah
- Rise of Tiglath-pileser III (745–727) to Assyria's throne
- Assyrian incursion that Uzziah opposes (743–742)

740–729 (Isaiah 5–12)

- Uzziah dies, succeeded by Jotham (740–735)
- Ahaz's reign (735–715) begins
- Israel-Syria invasion of Judah (734–733)
- Assyria defeats Israel-Syria, takes exiles, places Hoshea on Israel's throne, and makes Israel an administrative district of Assyrian Empire (732)

729–706 (Isaiah 13–27)

- Tiglath-pileser III conquers Babylon, proclaims himself king of Assyria and Babylon (729)
- Tiglath-pileser III dies, succeeded by Shalmaneser II (727–722)
- Assyria conquers Samaria, ending Israel's monarchy, and takes exiles (722)
- Shalmaneser II dies, succeeded by Sargon V (722/721–709)

- Merodach-baladan II of Babylon (721–709, 703–702) recaptures city of Babylon (721)
- Assyria puts down Israel-Syria-Philistia rebellion (720)
- Shabako (716–702) takes throne in Egypt, ending years of division (716)
- Ahaz dies, succeeded by Hezekiah (715–687)
- Assyria puts down rebellion in Ashdod and sweeps through Moab (713–711)
- Sargon V recaptures Babylon (709), declares himself king of Assyria and Babylon
- Sargon V subdues enemies, begins building new capital (709–706)

705–702 (Isaiah 28–35)

- Sargon V dies, succeeded by Sennacherib (705–681)
- Hezekiah rebels against Assyria (705–704)
- Merodach-baladan II retakes control of Babylon (703–702)
- Shabako of Egypt dies, succeeded by Shebitku (702–690)
- Hezekiah's illness and healing (703–702; see 38:1–39:8)
- Assyria retakes Babylon (702)

701–689 (Isaiah 36:1–37:8; 38:1–56:8)

- Flashback: Hezekiah's illness, healing, and hosting of Babylonian envoys (703–702; see 38:1–39:8)
- Sennacherib campaigns successfully against Egypt, Philistia, and Judah; defeating all Judah's fortified cities except Jerusalem, taking exiles, and securing tribute from Hezekiah before leaving the area (701; see 36:1–37:8)
- Sennacherib crushes rebellion in Babylon, retaking the city (700)
- Sennacherib campaigns from mountains east of Assyria to northern Arabian Desert (699–695)
- Co-regency of Hezekiah and Manasseh begins (697)
- Sennacherib battles Babylon and Elam (694–689)
- Shebitku of Egypt dies, succeeded by Tirhakah (690–664)

- Sennacherib destroys city of Babylon (689)

689–681 (Isaiah 37:9–38; 56:9–62:12; 63:1–66:24)

- Sennacherib continues constant building in Nineveh (689)
- Sennacherib threatens Judah, perhaps due to support of Tirhakah, loses 185,000 soldiers, returns home (688; see 37:9–37)
- Hezekiah dies, succeeded by Manasseh (687–686), who rules until 642
- Sennacherib assassinated (681), succeeded by Esarhaddon (681–669; see 37:38)

Introduction

No commentary can exhaust the literary, historical, theological, and ecclesial riches of Isaiah. As John Oswalt commented in a personal conversation, 'Isaiah is bottomless.' As my friend and mentor John D. W. Watts once told me, Isaiah provides readers with 'endless creative possibilities.' Thus, a commentator can merely learn and try to pass on that learning to others. Any journey through the whole of Isaiah is a long and arduous one, yet one that provides new strength and hope.

Introductions to individual books vary in commentary series, and there is more than one viable approach. Some writers seek to summarise most of the critical, exegetical, historical, and theological issues related to the book. Others try to handle issues not covered otherwise in the comments on individual passages. Thus, sometimes the introductory portion of a commentary can become, in effect, a small book. Still others take a shorter route, mainly introducing the commentary itself.

I am taking this latter route, since I believe many readers access commentaries of long biblical books by reading the comments on a specific chapter that interests them. I also believe that exegesis of a book's parts should control the commentator's observations about a book's overall setting, structure, and theology. Thus, I have put material on scholarly discussions in relevant individual chapters, and use footnotes

to direct readers to other passages that deal with related subjects. Each portion of the commentary has the following components: setting, structure, and analysis of a chapter or chapters' contents. In the rest of this Introduction, I will summarise what this commentary concludes on those subjects for the whole book of Isaiah.

Setting

This commentary contends that Isaiah wrote the entire book during a long ministry that unfolded in the era of Assyrian dominance (c. 745–612 B.C.). He wrote freely and imaginatively about the past and the future. This is a minority position in Isaiah studies, which treats multiple authorship virtually as scholarly orthodoxy. This commentary therefore agrees with conservative writers like J. A. Alexander, E. J. Young, J. A. Motyer, and John Oswalt that the book comes from the individual 1:1 introduces, and that the book includes predictive prophecy. Unlike those authors, however, it does not argue that Isaiah 40–66 chiefly addresses the post-587 B.C. period in Judah and Israel. Rather, it asserts that focusing on the whole era of Assyrian supremacy, not just the parts leading up to the Sennacherib invasion of 701 B.C., yields fruitful possibilities for understanding the settings of passages usually considered post-exilic (e.g. Isa. 24–27; 34–66). Therefore, the commentary agrees with the direction Hayes and Irvine take in their commentary on Isaiah 1–39, and G. V. Smith moves in his commentary on Isaiah 40–66, though with some different conclusions.

To ascertain potential Assyrian-era settings in Isaiah, this commentary utilises biblical texts, English translations of primary materials from Assyria, Babylon, and other lands, and selected histories of those lands. My goal has been to answer a fundamental question asked less and less often in Isaiah studies: What if the entire book came from Isaiah of Jerusalem, and thus reflects the times in which he lived? To answer that question, one must look harder at Assyria's complicated history with Babylon, Egypt, Elam, Judah, Israel, and other peoples than most commentaries do, and much harder than I have done in my past summative writings on

Isaiah. I hope that subsequent writers will look harder and better than I have done. One must also admire the artistic brilliance of the Hebrew poetry in Isaiah, while treating the book as an accurate historical document. Even if readers are not completely convinced by my analysis, perhaps they will at least ask a second question: What if more of the book comes from Isaiah's time than is generally supposed?

This commentary asserts that Isaiah's superscriptions and brief historical references (1:1; 2:1; 6:1; 13:1; 14:28; 20:1-6; 36:1; 37:9; 38:1; 39:1; 52:4), strategically placed narrative segments (6:1–8:22; 20:1-6; 22:15-25; and 36:1–39:8), references to times when Babylon fell to another nation (13:1-22; 21:1-10; 46:1–47:15), and references to Assyrian threats and incursions into Judah, Israel, and their region (1:2-9 **[?]**; 6:1–10:34; 15:1–17:14; 20:1-6; 36:1–37:38; 41:1-29; 52:4; 63:1-6) provide the book with a *consecutive historical framework* linked to Isaiah's lifetime. Within this framework, the famous references to Cyrus II in 44:28 and 45:1 are what they seem to be in context: startling early seventh-century B.C. statements about a person from the household of an Assyrian vassal. Thus, these two Cyrus texts parallel passages that feature the coming messianic son from the household of David (e.g. 11:1-16; 42:1-13). Both households have a future prominent son. One will rule part of the earth for a while. The other will rule the whole earth forever. Isaiah predicts these things well before the respective kings' births.

It is important to recall that in Isaiah's day, Israel and Judah were separate political entities that Yahweh promised to reunite. Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Zechariah, and other prophets share a common plot. Israel and Judah separated when Solomon died in c. 930 B.C. Yahweh sent prophets to both Israel (e.g. Hosea and Amos) and Judah (e.g. Isaiah and Jeremiah) to effect repentance as time passed and covenant infidelity grew. Both nations faced exile as the result of stubborn sin.

Israel suffered a series of exiles (732, 722, 720 **[?]**, 713–711, 701, and 670 B.C.) before Judah experienced their own in 605, 597, 587, and 582 B.C. Thus, there was not just one exile for Israel or Judah. Scholars tend to emphasise the fall of Israel in 722 and the fall of Jerusalem in 587 to the exclusion of all other

instances of exile. I have done so myself in the past. Some even refer to *the* exile, or *the Babylonian exile*, as if there were only one. Assyria took exiles from both nations during Isaiah's lifetime, a fact that needs more attention than it has received.

However decimated, neither land was ever empty, so residents and exiles alike needed Yahweh's word. Yahweh promised return, repopulation, and reuniting through what Jeremiah called the 'new covenant' (Jer. 30:1–31:40), which is the same thing Isaiah and Ezekiel call the 'everlasting covenant' (Isa. 55; 56:4-5; 61:8; Ezek. 16:60; 37:26), or the 'covenant of peace' (Ezek. 34:25; 37:26). In each of these prophets, the Davidic covenant is central to the reuniting and international ministry of God's people. Isaiah presents several clear messianic promises. The New Testament cites these passages contextually and historically.

These common themes have implications for Isaiah and for biblical theology. Given these shared components of prophetic thought, it is not odd for Isaiah to focus, for instance, on Israel in 40:27–49:13, and then on Judah in 49:14–56:8. It is not odd for the Davidic king and servant to stand at the heart of the comforting future Isaiah offers in 42:1-13; 49:1-13; 50:4-11; and 52:13–53:12. Thus, it is not odd for Jesus to declare a new covenant in His blood made with eleven Jews representing renewed Israel on the night before He died (Luke 22:20). It is not odd for Jesus to send Jews to the ends of the earth, which Isaiah calls 'the coastlands' (41:1; 66:18-21), with His gospel (Matt. 28:16-20; see Isa. 66:18-21).

Structure

Isaiah presents readers with a variety of challenges, not the least of which is its size. It is long by biblical standards, and very long compared to known Assyrian prophetic texts from the same era. The book has been divided into chapters and verses for centuries, and those who interpret it are used to those divisions. For the past two centuries, commentators on Isaiah have focused on divisions of the book suggested by adherents of various sorts of historical-critical analysis. Thus, readers have been trained to read the book as unfolding in two (chs. 1–39 and 40–66 or 1–33 and 34–66) or three (chs.

1–39, 40–55, and 56–66) major parts based on how individual commentators have viewed its date, authorship, and setting. While valuable, these traditional divisions do not necessarily do full justice to the book's contents, historical setting, and importance for daily life.

This commentary divides the book according to the number of times it depicts the movement *from* people's disastrous sins and their effects on creation, *to* their residing with God in Zion in a new heavens and earth, *through* God's redemptive work, shared *with* His servants. Zion passages mark the end of sections. Thus, this commentary examines Isaiah according to the following structure: 1:1–4:6; 5:1–12:6; 13:1–27:13; 28:1–35:10; 36:1–56:8; 56:9–62:12; and 63:1–66:24. It is always jarring to return to sin passages after the soaring Zion texts. It is therefore good to know that all Isaiah's main sections lead to Zion. The book is thereby gospel shaped. Indeed, it (and other books) introduced the term translated 'gospel' to New Testament writers (see 40:9; 41:27; 52:7; 60:6; and 61:1).

Analysis of Contents

Having suggested the book's structure, this commentary tries to discern each chapter or section's structure. This portion intends to help preachers and small group Bible study leaders understand and teach each part of Isaiah. I have taught Isaiah in seminary and college settings over the past several years. I also taught the entire book to a home Bible study group from our church. Of course, other outlines may prove better in readers' minds. My own sense is that determining a passage's structure is vital to preparing expositional messages.

The commentary then provides analysis of the verses in each section. It offers rather literal translations of Isaiah's beautiful words as part of the analysis of the book's verses. The aim is not to demonstrate Isaiah's poetic skills, though several comments try to demonstrate his prowess. The aim is to provide a largely word-for-word, phrase-for-phrase rendering that will allow readers of Hebrew to follow the Masoretic Text, and readers without Hebrew skills to walk as closely to the Hebrew text as possible. References to lexicons, theological word books, and longer contextual word studies appear frequently. The

translations will work best for readers who have the Hebrew Bible or a formal equivalent translation such as the NASB or ESV at hand. In the spirit of full disclosure, I was a member of the team that produced the ESV. The commentary mentions several textual variations scholars have suggested, but does not attempt to include every text-critical note suggested by the standard Hebrew text or by commentators seeking to provide this sort of exhaustive help. It often cites lengthier discussions of such matters. I have tried to make sense of the Masoretic Text, not assume it needs emendation.

To aid this exegesis, this commentary strives to use credible representative scholarly sources competently and respectfully to aid the exegesis. I have thought of other writers as conversation partners, not as allies or enemies. My goal has been to help readers see what is in this prophetic text. Hebrew-based commentaries, lexicons, and historical works constitute the bulk of the footnote citations, though monographs and articles also appear. Virtually every chapter of Isaiah has its own extensive history of interpretation. The secondary literature is vast, ancient, enriching, increasing, and often overwhelming. I doubt anyone can ever again claim (truthfully) to have read 'everything out there' on Isaiah. Thus, one makes choices, and not all will be the right ones. I have tried to cite my predecessors fairly and accurately. Where I have failed, I sincerely apologise and seek correction.

This commentary strives to treat Isaiah as a prophetic book, as a work that highlights major themes such as creation, sin in its many manifestations (e.g. covenant breaking), proper ethical behaviour, approaching judgement often described as 'the day of Yahweh', and renewal effected by Yahweh's redeeming work. Prophetic books have a theological plot that results in a positive outcome after many troubles. Prophetic books develop these plot elements in different ways, but even small books like Obadiah include them. Prophetic books utilise poetry that is part lyric and part essay, as well as narratives that introduce, explain, expand, and extend the poetry's subject matter. They use narratives that give historical context of varying types, and that contain the same thematic elements as the poetry. As I noted above, Isaiah's

prophetic book presents seven cycles that take readers from the depths of sin to the heights of Zion through Yahweh's redemptive work shared with His prophet. The basic contents are as follows.

First, Isaiah 1:1–4:6 unfolds in the last years of Uzziah's reign (c. 745–740 B.C.). It begins with a description of Jerusalem as a lonely, bloody city filled with corrupt worship and unjust law courts. It ends with a portrayal of Zion as a safe, cool, and verdant place where those written in Yahweh's book live with Him. Yahweh calls the heavens and earth as witnesses to the sins committed in Jerusalem, and to hear how He will change Jerusalem (1:2-31; see 3:1–4:1). Isaiah describes gentiles coming to Zion for God's *torah* (2:2-4), then urges Israel to do the same, before describing the fierce future day of Yahweh (2:6-22). He reproaches leaders and people in 3:1–4:1, carefully distinguishing between the righteous and the wicked. The section ends with Yahweh creating a covering over Zion to shield His people (4:2-6). This section has two superscriptions (1:1; 2:1), two statements of sin (1:2-26; 3:1–4:1), and two positive promises about Zion's future (1:27-31; 4:2-6). These chapters introduce the whole book.

Second, Isaiah 5–12 begins with a creative treatment of Israel and Judah as a wild, inexplicable vineyard (5:1-30). It proceeds to the redirecting of Isaiah's ministry in 6:1-13, a passage that begins with Uzziah's death in c. 740 B.C. and ends with the sad fact that the nation will be reduced to a small portion of its former size, which occurs by 701. Isaiah 7–10 then focuses on the continued rise of Assyria in c. 733–732 and its effects on Judah and Israel. Assyria will sweep through the land (7:17-27) bringing darkness (8:11-22), yet will eventually prove so arrogant that Yahweh will stop their armies short of Jerusalem (10:5-34). Yahweh's promises to David and his lineage (7:10-16; 9:1-7 [ET]) provide hope and joy for those who believe (7:9). Isaiah 11–12 concludes the segment with a description of a new earth anchored in the Davidic Messiah's righteous rule (11:1-9). This Messiah will bless nations (11:10), and bring Israelites home from the places Assyria has scattered them (11:11-16). The people will drink water from Zion's wells of salvation (12:1-6).

Third, Isaiah 13–27 focuses on foreign lands, Assyrian invasions, and Yahweh's purposes for all nations. Beginning with Babylon (13:1-22), Isaiah leads readers through the minefield of Assyrian-era international politics. Babylon fell to Tiglath-pileser III, who ruled Assyria c. 745–727, in 729 (13:1-22). Despite this triumph, Tiglath-pileser III, who was both king of Assyria and king of Babylon, will die (in 727) like all other monarchs (14:1-27). His successors, Shalmaneser V (c. 727–721) and Sargon II (c. 721–705), continue his policies and string of victories. After Ahaz dies and Hezekiah (c. 715–687) succeeds him in c. 715 (14:28), Assyria continues, conquering Moab (chs. 15–16), subduing Israel and Syria again (17:1-14), thwarting Cush's diplomatic efforts (18:1-7), causing instability in Egypt (19:1-15), defeating Philistia and Israel (20:1-6) in 713–711, conquering Babylon again in 709 (21:1-9), and making Jerusalem and Tyre fear (22:1–23:19). Meanwhile, Yahweh plans to convert people from Egypt, Assyria, and Judah (19:16-25). He also intends to judge the whole earth (24:1-13). He will gather His faithful ones to Zion, where death will no longer veil the nations (25:1-12), and the dead will rise alive like wildflowers in the spring (26:19). As in 11:11-16, Yahweh will bring scattered Israelites home to live with Him safely in Zion (27:1-13).

Fourth, Isaiah 28–35 repeats the pattern in a new context. With Assyria's Sargon II passing from the scene in 705, and Sennacherib (c. 705–681) taking his place, Israel and Judah count on other lands to save them (28:1-13). Isaiah considers such plans a covenant with death (28:14-29) that put Jerusalem in grave danger (29:1-24). Trusting in Egypt to save Judah from Assyria will end in woe (30:1–31:9). Judah and Israel must instead trust in Yahweh and the coming Davidic king He has promised (32:1–33:22). They must confess that Yahweh is their judge, law giver, king, and only saviour (33:22). In the future, Yahweh will bring those who do make this confession to Zion, where the lame walk, the blind receive sight, and sorrow flees away (34:1–35:10).

Fifth, Isaiah 36:1–56:8 contains Isaiah's longest and most ambitious work. Set in the days just before (38:1–39:1-8), during (36:1–37:8), and after (37:9-38) the well-documented Assyrian invasion of 701 B.C., these chapters house some

of Isaiah's best-known and best-loved passages. Isaiah 36–39 portrays two blasphemous Assyrians (36:1-22; 37:1-8), and an arrogant king of Judah (39:1-8), who soon feels Assyria's wrath (36:1; see 2 Kings 18:1-17). After setting this discouraging historical context of c. 703–681 in 36:1–39:8, the prophet introduces the great theme of comfort in 40:1-26. By 701, Israel has been subjugated for thirty years, and Judah has shrunk to basically a city-nation. Assyria continues to march through other lands during 700–689, crushing Babylon in the process, and threatening Judah again shortly thereafter (37:9-35).

Thus, it is little wonder the people need reassurance. Isaiah proceeds to comfort questioning Israel in 40:27–49:13, and then searching Judah in 49:14–56:8. Yahweh's promise of a servant, like and greater than David, stands at the heart of this comfort. A humble (42:1-9), light-giving (49:5-13), persevering (50:4-11), suffering, dying, and rising (52:13–53:12) servant of Yahweh will aid servant Israel (41:8-10; 49:1-4) and Judah (49:14). As a result, Israel, Judah, and persons from many lands will reside with Yahweh in Zion (54:1–56:8).

Sixth, Isaiah 56:9–62:12 once again takes readers from the depths of sin to the glories of Zion. Isaiah 37:9-35 suggests a post-689 B.C. threat to Judah, and 37:36-38 describes Sennacherib's death in c. 681. Therefore, this section may unfold during Hezekiah's latter days, or perhaps the early days of Manasseh's dark reign. Sennacherib remains Assyria's king. Blind watchmen, sleeping dogs, and slack shepherds rule the people; the righteous die without an advocate (56:9-12). The people descend again into idolatry (57:1-13). Yahweh pledges to end ongoing idolatry and its effects by effecting repentance (58:14), sending a redeemer to Zion, giving the people an everlasting covenant and defeating their enemies (59:1-21), and gathering the people to Zion (62:1-12). This redeemer will bring good news to the poor, the hurting, and the captive (61:1-3). He gives those He gathers a new name to mark their new citizenship (62:2).

Seventh, Isaiah 63:1–66:24 opens with Yahweh's victory over His enemies and His wrath at sin (63:1-14). Prayers for renewal follow (63:15–64:12). Yahweh responds by noting all

the times the people spurned His grace (65:1-12), and swears that only His servants will find rest (65:13-15). And it is quite a rest indeed, for it will come to pass in a new heaven and earth like that described in 11:1-9 (65:17–66:14; see Rev. 21:1-8). Before then, Yahweh will send His servants to the world's nations to gather other followers (66:15-21). Once in the new home, the people will be there endlessly (66:22-23), but their enemies will burn forever (66:24). As 30:29-33 and 37:37-38 describe, Sennacherib is the enemy who represents all other foes of Yahweh and His servants. His death in 681 B.C. proves Yahweh's power over even the greatest human rulers.

Yahweh displays indomitable determination to redeem in Isaiah. The creator *will* redeem His people. He *will* give them a permanent home in a new heaven and earth, a perfect Zion, and a safe place. The redeemed *will* come from many nations, and they *will* serve Him in their lifetimes and beyond. Sin and death cannot stop this plan. All Yahweh's covenants will be kept, the dead shall rise, justice will prevail, and the Davidic Messiah will play the key role in this inexorable victory. Isaiah's sin-to-Zion cycles thus provide a masterful literary means of presenting His prophetic message.

Conclusion

This commentary asks readers to recall that Isaiah of Jerusalem was a real man writing to real people during real times. He had a supportive wife, with whom he raised children. Kings rejected his advice, so he focused on his family and a few disciples for a time. Later, he re-engaged, despite the risks of doing so. With his fellow citizens, he endured wartime fears and privations. He lived much longer than the life expectancy of his day, long enough to know Sennacherib had perished without conquering Jerusalem, as Yahweh had promised.

Isaiah was a great poet by any definition of the term. Equally adept at short and long pieces, he often shaped his material into what we today consider sermons and essays. His use of words is always skillful, at times playful, almost whimsical, yet always purposeful. He had a keen historical eye, and a realistic grasp of human cruelty, frailty, genius, and kindness. He knew God, and he knew people.

Isaiah was an incisive thinker, a perceptive theologian able to integrate faith, life, and the future. He saw Yahweh's glory, goodness, sovereignty, mercy, fidelity, righteousness, justice, and grace as few have, before or since. He envisioned the Messiah's coming, and his eventual rule over all creation. Given the length of his ministry, Isaiah possessed perseverance that can only come by discipline and hope. I have been privileged to know a few good poets, some fine essayists, and many faithful pastors and theologians. Such persons often address controversial issues, and they often face rejection in their lifetime. I am grateful that they have helped me see Isaiah better, and that he has helped me see them better. His legacy lives on in them.

Section One
Isaiah 1:1–4:6

1.
The Unfaithful Nation: Isaiah 1

Introduction

Isaiah's opening chapter provides a fitting introduction to the book's historical setting and to some of its major themes. The superscription indicates that the book's contents include writings composed c. 745–680 B.C. This era includes many momentous events: the rise and supremacy of the Assyrian Empire (745–612); the Syria-Ephraim Crisis of 733–732; the final years of the Kingdom of Israel; Hezekiah's reign (c. 715–687); the Sennacherib Crisis of 701; Assyria's ongoing battles with Babylon (697–689); a second Sennacherib Crisis, probably after 689; and the early years of Manasseh's reign. The chapter's contents include key themes such as covenant breaking, the people's need for repentance, and the future renewal of Jerusalem. Other vital themes, such as the coming of the Messiah and Yahweh's rule over the nations, do not appear. Thus, the chapter does not introduce the whole of the book in a classical thematic sense. It expresses very powerfully, however, the concept of Judah as an unfaithful nation. In this way, it sets the stage for the book's further statements on sin, punishment, and ultimate renewal of the covenant people and the nations.

Setting

Isaiah 1:1 opens the book during the late years of the reign of Uzziah (also known as Azariah; see 1 Kings 15:1-7). Though

precision is not possible, he died c. 740 B.C. This means that the last years of his largely successful reign coincide with the early years of Tiglath-pileser III of Assyria (c. 745–727), who initiates that nation's great empire. Assyria was the ancient world's dominant nation until at least 627, before falling to Babylon in 612. Thus, virtually all of Isaiah's adult life took place against the backdrop of Assyrian pre-imminence. Judah and most other near eastern countries moved in Assyria's wake.

Scholars tend to take one of two general approaches to the setting of Isaiah 1–5. First, they consider Isaiah 6:1-13 the prophet's inaugural call and vision. Since 6:1 clearly states that this vision occurred the year Uzziah died (6:1), they naturally consider Isaiah 1–5 later oracles that introduce the book in some way, yet they believe Isaiah wrote these materials.[1] Second, they consider Isaiah 6 the commissioning oracle and find 1:2-31 to contain materials from a variety of situations in Isaiah's times and long afterwards.[2] Though they disagree on authorship and dating issues, they agree that passages like 1:2-9, which depict cities burning and Jerusalem exposed, likely stem from 701 B.C. or later. If 6:1-13 is not a call narrative, as I argue below, then it is necessary to examine other options for chapters 1–5, preferably in Uzziah's reign.

According to Assyrian records,[3] an Azariah of Judah led opposition to Tiglath-pileser III when he invaded western lands during the third year of his reign (743–742 B.C.). John Bright notes, 'Many scholars, to be sure, because of the chronological difficulties and because the encounter apparently took place in northern Syria, have supposed that this Azariah was a ruler of a small state in that area. But we know nothing of such a state, whereas to posit two Judahs, each with kings named Azariah, is to ask rather much of coincidence.'[4] The fragmentary account indicates that the Assyrians succeeded in extending their influence further southwest. In fact, the

1. See for example Motyer, 40; and Oswalt, *Isaiah 1-39*, pp. 79-81.
2. See for example Williamson, *Isaiah 1-5*, pp. 7-9.
3. See *ARAB*, 1:274, entry 770; *ANET*, p. 282.
4. Bright, p. 268.

record mentions destruction and burning, and possibly the establishment of an Assyrian presence in Judah. Second Kings 15:19 notes that about five years later, Uzziah's counterpart in Israel, Menahem, paid tribute to the Assyrian king, who is called Pul, his Babylonian name . While Assyria may not have forced Judah to pay tribute in Uzziah's time, it appears his neighbouring allies in the old anti-Assyrian alliance fell into line.

Given this background, and given the fact that 4:2-6 ends the book's first major section with a Zion passage, the following may be a possible scenario for 1:1–4:6. First, 1:1 sets the book's general time frame. Second, in 1:2-31 the prophet chastises Jerusalem for its hypocritical worship and systematic injustices that have led Yahweh to turn Judah over to her enemy, in this case Assyria. Jerusalem stands, but other cities burn. This material also fits 701 B.C. (see 36:1; 2 Kings 18:13-17), and other times, yet this instance fits the book's chronology and deserves more consideration than it has received from commentators.

Third, in Isaiah 2:1-22 the prophet notes that though other nations will come to Zion to worship in later times, Jacob's descendants hardly do so now. In response, Yahweh has rejected His people (2:6), letting them fall, though leaving them with their own kings for now. If no repentance occurs, then the full force of Yahweh's judgement will fall. This chapter may then resonate with Hosea and Amos, whose work preceded Isaiah's ministry. Fourth, in 3:1–4:1 Isaiah mentions new rulers coming into power, which may reflect Uzziah's waning days.

This Assyrian-era setting may help explain the specific and general nature of the material. It is specific enough to explain how cities could be ablaze and Isaiah not draw the same conclusions as in chapters 7–37. It could explain how these chapters address the house of Jacob as in trouble, yet still standing. It also has the general benefit of suggesting how 1:1 provides a real historical framework for what follows.

In this scenario, Isaiah 1–5 probably reflects the era in which Jotham has already begun his co-regency with Uzziah (see 2 Chron. 26:21). This arrangement likely lasted c. 750–740 B.C.

According to 2 Chronicles 27:3-6, Jotham achieved a certain level of military success. He subdued Ammon, and forced this neighbour to pay tribute monies. He also built forts and store cities.

During these years of co-regency Jotham and Uzziah continued to support the temple and its worship procedures, but they did not remove the high places and other aspects of popular religion (see 2 Kings 15:34-35). As a result, the people's faith as it related to temple worship was mixed, which in turn led to oppression and injustice. The books of Hosea and Amos reinforce this portrait of oppression and tearing of the social fabric. Both in Israel and Judah the nations' leaders and ruling classes sought wealth through all possible means, including injustice. The poor had little reason to be interested in the survival of such a system. Thus, even before Uzziah dies Isaiah considers Israel, Judah, and Jerusalem a spoiled vineyard ripe for destruction (5:8-30). All that remained was for a powerful enemy to arise and be used by Yahweh to punish the rebellious vineyard. Unfortunately for Israel and Judah, such a powerful foe loomed on the horizon. Assyria, led by Tiglath-pileser III (745–727 B.C.), was ready to assume this role.

This opening chapter lacks the historical specificity of many later chapters. Nonetheless, it provides an excellent beginning to Isaiah's book, for it introduces the sins the prophet addressed throughout his ministry, describes the deteriorating political and social conditions in Judah at the end of Uzziah's rule, and provides a focus on Jerusalem that Isaiah will sustain to the end of the book (see Isa. 65–66).

Structure

Following the book's superscription in 1:1, the chapter unfolds in three major parts. First, 1:2-9 depicts Yahweh's covenant people as so stubbornly sinful as to compare unfavourably with an ox or donkey. Their disobedience is unnatural and self-destructive. Second, 1:10-20 claims that such people need to hear Yahweh's word (1:10-17), come to their senses, and return to Him (1:18-20). Third, 1:21-31 portrays Jerusalem as a prostitute who must return to Yahweh or perish. These

metaphors are as vivid as they are honest. They leave no room for valid protest; they leave no doubt about the people's appropriate response.

Isaiah's Vision (1:1)

The book's superscription serves several functions. First, it identifies the book as **the vision of Isaiah, the son of Amoz**. Of all the prophets, only the superscriptions of Isaiah, Obadiah, and Nahum designate the words that follow as 'visions.' Oswalt observes that this term suggests intensity when used to describe sight in 33:20 and 57:8, though here it 'denotes something like insight or perception.'[5] Young believes the term means more. He argues that 'vision' means what 'God had placed in the prophet's mind or had revealed to him. It here denotes all that is given in writing in the book before us, and thus clearly attests the supernatural origin of the entire prophecy.'[6] Childs agrees, commenting that the use of 'vision' establishes the book's contents as 'divine revelation.'[7] The book thereby challenges readers to receive what follows as God's word, not simply the prophet Isaiah's.

Significantly, the reference to Isaiah indicates that all that follows stems from this individual.[8] Superscriptions that cite what follows as Isaiah's words also occur in 2:1 and 13:1. He appears as a major character in narratives in chapters 6–8, 20, and 36–39, and the book employs first-person speech from the prophet in various places (see 6:1; 8:1; 18:4; 22:4-6; etc.). All ancient sources point to Isaiah as the originator of the book's contents. The prophet's name derives from the Hebrew word for 'he saves', and means 'Yahweh saves' or 'Yahweh is salvation.'[9] Thus, his very name points to a major emphasis in his overall message.

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5. Oswalt, *Isaiah 1-39*, p. 82.

6. Young, *Isaiah 1-18*, p. 30.

7. Childs, p. 11.

8. See the Introduction to this commentary.

9. For a discussion of the name's meaning, consult Wildberger, *Isaiah 1-12*, pp. 4-5.

Second, the superscription identifies **things concerning Judah and Jerusalem** as the book's focal points. Other nations, especially Israel, certainly play a prominent role in Isaiah, whether as opponents of Judah, instruments of divine punishment, recipients of divine judgement, or future recipients of Yahweh's renewing aid. Nonetheless, Judah and Jerusalem constitute the sun around which these nations orbit in Isaiah. What unfolds does so in light of how it affects this small nation and its capital. Judah and Jerusalem are not the creator's sole interest, yet the book uses the covenant people as the touchstone for the creator's interests, plans, and actions.

Third, the superscription claims to establish the historical setting for the whole book. Scholars as different in perspective as Otto Kaiser and J. A. Alexander agree on this point.[10] This means, according to Childs, 'The reader is not encouraged to extend the historical setting of Isaiah's ministry beyond the reign of King Hezekiah… but is instructed to interpret the material within the historical framework established by the superscription.'[11] Thus, the superscription poses a hermeneutical challenge to multiple-authorship theories, just as the materials that relate to a post-exilic setting pose a challenge to single-author theories. These words spoken **in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah** were relevant in the eighth century and early seventh century B.C., yet also applied to—and apply to—subsequent generations. It is interesting that 1:1 does not mention Manasseh, since 37:36-38 occurs during his reign. It is equally interesting that Nahum and Habakkuk, both of whom could have ministered during Manasseh's time likewise do not mention his kingship. Just as Hosea 1:1 does not list several Israelite kings who lived while he worked, it seems Isaiah does not count Manasseh as a legitimate ruler.[12]

In the context of the whole book of Isaiah, this superscription serves to demarcate the historical setting of the various sections of the book. Thus, 1:2–5:30 addresses the Uzziah/

10. O. Kaiser, *Isaiah 1-12*, p. 1; and Alexander, 1:80.

11. Childs, p. 12.

12. See Roberts, First *Isaiah*, p. 12 fn 2.

Jotham era, 6:1–14:27 addresses the Jotham/Ahaz era, and 14:28–66:24 addresses the Hezekiah/Manasseh era, though the book does not mention Manasseh by name. Each of these sections dwells on the past, deals with the present, and looks to the future, so the original time frame hardly limits the prophet's scope of vision.

Israel's Self-Destructive Disobedience (1:2-9)

Isaiah's message begins with an indictment of Israel's sin (1:2-3) and continues with a description of the effects of their rebelliousness (1:4-9). Thus, these verses introduce one of the book's major emphases, the covenant-breaking sins committed against Yahweh by Judah. These sins mark them as a people fit and ripe for judgement. Isaiah's desire that Yahweh remove sin from the covenant people and indeed from creation continues throughout the book, culminating in the final judgement scene that concludes the prophecy (66:15-24).

[1:2] The prophet calls the heavens and the earth as witnesses (**Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth**) to the 'rebellion and ingratitude in the sons whom He has reared and brought to honour.'[13] Yahweh **reared and brought them up, but they have rebelled against** Him. In the Old Testament, the heavens and earth are often called to court, whether as witnesses to an oath (Deut. 4:26), witnesses for Yahweh when he 'prosecutes' Israel (Ps. 50), witnesses to God's greatness (1 Chron. 16:31; Ps. 69:34-35), or witnesses to Israel's sin (Jer. 2:12).[14] This motif stresses God's status as creator, since He commands the heavens and earth (Gen. 1:1). It also highlights Yahweh's covenant commitment, since the complaint is against Israel, whom Yahweh identifies in 1:2 as children He has reared (see also Hos. 11:1-9).

[1:3] Yahweh claims the disobedience this passage describes simply does not make sense. It defies all logic, reason, and intelligence. It is unnatural. After all, Isaiah indicates, **an ox knows its owner, and a donkey [knows] its master's feeding trough** (1:3a). Yet inexplicably Israel **does**

13. Skinner, *Isaiah 1-39,* p. 2.

14. Motyer, p. 42.

not know and does not have **discernment** concerning what their upbringing by Yahweh means for them (1:3b). Such is true despite all Yahweh has done in the past and is doing in the present. Their rebellion and willful lack of perception constitute 'the basis of the whole subsequent argument.'[15] This opinion is as true of the whole book as it is for the immediate context.[16]

[1:4] Isaiah states what the nation has become and how they sank to such depravity. Verse 4 uses four terms to describe them: **sinful**, **heavy with iniquity**, **seed of evildoers**, and **children of corruptors**. The first two terms are the general Old Testament words for missing the mark of God's standards and incurring guilt for wrongdoing, respectively. The last two terms indicate that Judah has mistreated and misled others, thus showing themselves to be wicked children unworthy of Yahweh. The current generation acts like their forebearers. Their sins are internal and external; they are trans-generational; and they harm both the sinner and those around them.

Three verbs explain how they came to deserve the four negative descriptions. Each one denotes covenant breaking. First, Israel has **forsaken Yahweh**, a phrase used in Deuteronomy 31:16 to describe a future time when Israel will worship other gods. Second, Israel has **spurned the Holy One of Israel**. The word translated 'spurned' occurs in Deuteronomy 31:20 in the context of Israel spurning Yahweh for other gods once they settle in the Promised Land, so it likely has covenantal connotations here. Third, Israel has **turned aside** from Yahweh. Like the previous two phrases, this one occurs elsewhere in the context of Israelite idolatry (Ezek. 14:5). It also describes wicked persons who sin all their lives in Psalm 58:3. Clearly, these terms indicate Israel's active and ongoing covenant infidelity. They have sinned against their covenant partner. Having forsaken, spurned, and turned aside from Yahweh, they have necessarily become sinners, evildoers, corruptors of others, and persons carrying a heavy load of

15. Skinner, *Isaiah 1-39*, p. 2.

16. Oswalt, *Isaiah 1-39*, p. 81.

guilt. They have strayed far from their purpose, which is to be 'a kingdom of priests and a holy nation' (Exod. 19:6). Therefore, **they are utterly estranged** from their God. The family tie has been broken completely.

All this sin contrasts with Yahweh's character. He is **the holy one of Israel**, who called Israel to be holy because He is holy (Lev. 11:44; 19:2). He is the holy one *of Israel* because He is uniquely 'set apart' for the covenant nation.[17] He is holy *in His person* because He is 'set apart' from the sins committed on earth.[18] The name 'holy one of Israel' is one of Isaiah's favourite designations for God. It appears over twenty times, and these occurrences span 1:4 to 60:14.[19] Thus, this theme is one of many concepts that link the book's various sections and diverse contents. Here the term almost certainly refers primarily to Yahweh's long-term commitment to Israel. He is 'holy' in covenant keeping.

[1:5-6] Verses 5-6 indicate that the rebellious children have suffered greatly for what they have done. The consequences for disobedience to the covenant detailed in Leviticus 26: 14-39 and Deuteronomy 28:15-68 have begun. They have been **struck down** because they have chosen to **rebel.** Their **whole head is sick** and their **whole head faint.** These illnesses, the wounds, have grown so infected that the nation's collective body has gotten terribly ill. No one has attempted to dress the wounds with oil, so there is no current hope for recovery (1:6). The prophet asks **why** they wish further beatings (1:5), which underscores the need to turn from what they have been doing to a new way of life before worse things occur. The question highlights the foolishness inherent in continuing the current course of action. Yet it also indicates that there remains time to repent. At this point, Yahweh has not yet decided that the whole people must go into exile, the final stage of punishment for covenant infidelity (Deut. 28:64-68).

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17. Motyer, p. 44.

18. Young, *Isaiah 1-18*, pp. 47-48.

19. Oswalt (*Isaiah 1-39*, p. 33) offers the following list: 1:4; 5:19, 24; 10:20; 12:6; 17:7; 29:19, 23; 30:11, 12, 15; 31:1; 37:23; 40:25; 41:14, 16, 20; 43:3, 14, 15; 45:11; 47:4; 48:17; 49:7 (2x); 54:5; 55:5; 60:9, 14.

[1:7] The metaphor of a battered body in 1:5-6 probably refers to battles in the land. Verses 7-9 depict the carnage the nation has suffered from foreign incursions. In 1:7a Isaiah comments: **Your land is a wasteland; your cities are burning with fire**. The phrase 'Your land is a wasteland' occurs in Leviticus 26:33, where an exile from the land ('I will scatter you…') that will leave the land a 'wasteland' and 'the cities desolate' is threatened if long-term, ingrained covenant disobedience occurs. In Isaiah 6:11-13, Yahweh tells Isaiah he must preach until towns and houses are empty, the population carried away, and the ground 'wasteland.' He threatens Damascus with the same fate in 17:9. In 62:4, which is part of a future song of praise, Isaiah rejoices that at some point the land will no longer be 'wasteland.' Finally, in 64:9-12, a petition within a prayer of confession, the prophet states that the nation's cities, including Jerusalem, will be burned and part of a 'wasteland.' Such terminology is a regular part of the warning passages in Jeremiah and Ezekiel.[20] Isaiah considers the land a wasteland from the beginning of his book. The covenant consequences (curses) have already begun to unfold in the mid-eighth century B.C.

In 1:7b the prophet indicates that non-Israelites, **strangers**[21] devastate the land. However, he does not name a specific foreign threat at this point, perhaps because foreign invaders came repeatedly to Judah. In Rehoboam's reign (930–913 B.C.), Egypt invaded Judah and looted the temple (1 Kings 14:25-27). During Amaziah's reign (796–767; co-regency with Uzziah 792–767), Jehoash of Israel (798–782; co-regency with Jeroboam II 793–782) captured Jerusalem. He broke down the city's walls, looted the temple and the treasury, and took captives (2 Kings 14:11-14). Isaiah would have certainly known of these past defeats and would have considered them evidence of his people's failure to keep their covenant promises. He would also have seen them as warnings and harbingers of worse things to come.

20. For a list of passages, consult Lisowsky, p. 1462.

21. See *HALOT*, 1:279 for passages that use the term in this manner.

As was noted above, Uzziah likely suffered defeat at the hands of Tiglath-pileser III in c. 743 B.C. Later, Assyria invaded and conquered much of Israel in c. 733–732, making Israel an Assyrian province. Then, Assyria conquered Samaria in 722–721 after a period of rebellion. Finally, Assyria captured and burned dozens of Judah's cities in 701. Jerusalem survived due to Yahweh's grace (see 36:1–37:38), but that fact does not negate the general desolation of the land following the Assyrian incursion (see 40:1-2). Thus, Clements believes 1:7b almost surely refers 'to the armies of the Assyrians who had devastated Judah, but it is a common convention for a prophet not to identify explicitly the enemies and oppressors who are working as the instruments of God.'[22] Isaiah simply asserts that strangers spoil the land, just as Leviticus 26:16 and Deuteronomy 28:30 ff. threaten. This situation will reverse in the future, according to Amos 9:14 and Isaiah 65:21-25.[23] Clearly, Moses' covenant curses are unfolding. Wildberger writes that 'word for word, what has happened corresponds exactly to what has been included in threats of what would come upon Israel in the case of unfaithfulness.'[24]

[1:8] Because of the invasions, enemies have conquered small cities. Thus, the **daughter of Zion**, Jerusalem, stands out (1:8). She rises above the landscape **like a hut in a cucumber field** or a **booth** in a stripped **vineyard**. Motyer observes that such structures are 'flimsy and transient.'[25] Their survival cannot depend on the strength of the structures themselves. External forces will determine what happens to them. This sense of utter dependency is reinforced by the metaphor **like a city besieged**,[26] for a city under siege is one that must

22. Clements, *Isaiah 1-39*, p. 31.

23. Wildberger, *Isaiah 1-12*, p. 28.

24. Ibid.

25. Motyer, p. 44.

26. Scholars translate this metaphor in several ways. The Septuagint, Syriac, and Aramaic basically read 'like a besieged city' (see Wildberger, *Isaiah 1-12*, p. 20). This reading requires a slight emendation. Literally the word means 'a city spared' or 'a city set apart' (*HALOT*, 1:718). The ambiguity allows for readers to envision a city under siege that is spared, so the word provides a natural bridge from 1:8b to 1:9a. For other discussions,

await help from allies, nature, or Yahweh. The inhabitants have taken the last resort of retreat and desperate resistance. Nonetheless, for the time being Jerusalem remains intact, albeit under very lonely circumstances.

The term 'daughter of Zion', or 'daughter Zion', expresses the city's special status with Yahweh. In this phrase, the daughter and Zion are one and the same.[27] Elaine Follis writes that this term acts as 'an image of the unity between place and people within which divine favour and civilization create a setting of stability and home.'[28] In other words, Zion is God's daughter, and as such, she stands as a comforting and nurturing symbol to the rest of the land. If she is under siege, then it is likely that the other cities have already been destroyed. Such was the case in Amaziah's time, Uzziah's time, and Hezekiah's time. In Lamentations, the 'daughter of Zion' has herself been taken (1:6; etc.),[29] so what happened to lesser places will eventually happen to her.

[1:9] Isaiah now asserts, **Had Yahweh of hosts not left us some survivors we would have been like Sodom, we would have resembled Gomorrah.** In biblical theology, the cities of **Sodom** and **Gomorrah** are paradigmatic for sinful places swiftly and permanently destroyed by the Lord.[30] So Isaiah claims that if Yahweh had not been gracious the whole land would have been devastated as swiftly and completely as those places. Isaiah demonstrates knowledge of Genesis 19, just as he has demonstrated knowledge of Leviticus and Deuteronomy. Having already linked Jerusalem and Judah's predicament to the covenant curses, he now moves farther back to include the first prominent city overthrown by the creator. This reference emphasises the fact that Yahweh's twin roles of creator and covenant maker put all places under

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consult Young, *Isaiah 1-18*, p. 56 fn 51 and Motyer, p. 44 fn 2.

27. Young, *Isaiah 1-18*, p. 55.

28. Follis, p. 1103.

29. See House, *Lamentations*, p. 352.

30. See Isaiah 13:19; Jeremiah 23:14; 49:18; 50:40; Lamentations 4:6; Ezekiel 16:46, 48, 49, 53, 55, 56; Amos 4:11; Zephaniah 2:9; Matthew 10:15; 11:23, 24; Luke 10:12; 17:29; Romans 9:29; 2 Peter 2:6; Jude 1:7; and Revelation 11:18.

His control. Unless Yahweh had left some survivors, the city would have disappeared as suddenly and finally as Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of their punishment.

The fact that Yahweh left some survivors underscores His sovereign grace. Israel's sins and their consequence are detailed clearly in 1:2-4. The fact that Yahweh has invoked the covenant curses described in Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28 emerges in 1:5-8. Yahweh's leaving of a few survivors occurred to spur repentance and renewal. Leviticus 26:14-39 describes Yahweh's stern means of trying to get the covenant people to listen to Him, and it seems such measures have been taken in eighth-century B.C. Israel.

This mention of 'survivors' begins the book's interest in Yahweh's preservation of a minority of persons within Judah. This group of people is often called 'the remnant.'[31] As the prophecy unfolds, the remnant becomes increasingly identified as the faithful followers of Yahweh who live in a largely unbelieving and thus unfaithful nation. Only Yahweh can create the remnant, though circumstances certainly help identify them and prove their character. Romans 9:29 cites this verse as part of a theology of a remnant of Israelites in this manner. Paul notes that God preserves a remnant of faithful persons, and uses this verse to argue that it is only by God's grace that any person survives.[32]

Israel Needs to Obey and Return (1:10-20)

Isaiah continues to indict the covenant people for their sins. This segment gives more concrete testimony of what they have done than 1:2-9. It also deals with possible objections Israel might raise to this criticism. As will be the case throughout the book, Yahweh exposes Israel's sin so that Israel may be induced to repent, to turn back to covenant obedience. Yahweh does not simply harangue or complain; Yahweh warns so that He can eventually forgive a repenting people. Imperatives structure these verses. Yahweh commands them

31. The word used here (*sarid*) is not the one typically used for 'remnant' (*shearit*), though the concept is virtually the same.

32. For a discussion consult Wagner, *Heralds of the Good News*, pp. 110-116.

to 'hear' in 1:10, to 'wash' in 1:16, and to 'come and reason' in 1:18. The last two commands are logical responses to the first.

[1:10] Following on the imagery in 1:9, the prophet urges the **rulers of Sodom** and the **people of Gomorrah** to **hear the word of Yahweh**, an exhortation synonymous with obeying that word. Several Old Testament passages call Israel to such hearing/obeying. Of course, the most famous of these commands occur in Deuteronomy (see 5:1; 6:1; 6:4; 7:12; etc.), where Yahweh repeatedly tells Israel to hear/obey the words of the law, which are indeed God's words. In each instance, Israel's future depends on a positive, obedient, sustained response to what they are told. Israel has acted like the very epitome of sinful persons, yet Yahweh has left them some survivors. Divine patience for now has overruled their deserved punishment. Repentance and obedience should follow.

[1:11-15] Despite their behaviour, the people have brought sacrifices to the temple. As Childs observes, 'Like other prophets before him (1 Sam. 15; Amos 5), Isaiah confronts a multitude of worshippers who crowd into the temple to fulfill their sacrificial obligations.'[33] They have brought a **multitude of… sacrifices**. They have brought **fatlings**, **bulls**, **lambs**, and **goats**, yet Yahweh is angry with them. He does **not delight** in them (1:11). Yahweh says they **come to see my face** at the appointed times, yet He refuses to accept their sacrifices (1:12-13). Their observances disgust Yahweh (1:14), and He will not answer their prayers (1:15). Clearly the people had come to believe that 'doing worship' was what Yahweh required. If so, they learn that such is not the case. Mere external religious activity, however regular and scrupulous, has never been the essence of serving Yahweh. Thus, when Jesus condemned similar attitudes He agreed with Isaiah, Amos, Jeremiah, and Malachi.[34]

Why does Yahweh consider their religious activities mere **trampling of my courts** (1:12), assemblies of **iniquity** (1:13),

33. Childs, p. 19.

34. See Amos 4:1–5:5; Jeremiah 7:1–8:3; 26:1-15; Malachi 1:6–3:15; Matthew 21:12-17; 22:34–23:39.

and a **burden** to Him (1:14)? Why does He turn away from their prayers (1:15)? Why do such observances avail them nothing before God—indeed fill Yahweh with anger?

Because despite their external religiosity, their **hands are filled with blood** (1:15b). Clements writes that this phrase 'refers to the perpetration of crimes of violence, but the prophet no doubt also had in mind that the worshippers would be marked with the bloodstains of the sacrificial animals they had slaughtered for use in worship.'[35] Those involved in violence, whether personally or through approval of violence in society,[36] do not make valid sacrifices. They simply kill animals. Thus, they add the blood of animals to the blood of humans, thereby covering their hands with bloodguilt. In effect, they cover their hands with the blood of the sacrifice, yet are never cleansed because they do not sacrifice with sincerity, with integrity. Jeremiah includes a similar criticism in his first temple sermon (Jer. 7:6). Apparently, this metaphor in effect encompassed the whole range of sins committed with no intention of repentance, yet with every intention of continuing to attend services at the temple. In short, the phrase was meant to convince hearers of their rank hypocrisy.

[1:16-17] No less than nine straightforward commands follow to instruct the people in what to do now. The first two—**wash yourselves, clear yourselves**—set the tone for the rest. Their hands are bloody and they are guilty, so they must seek true cleansing, which is the purpose of sacrifices offered in obedient faith by a person who has truly turned from, repented of, his or her sin.

Of course, these commands are God's word, so the human response comes only *after* the divine initiative. The first word ('wash') appears repeatedly in passages devoted to ritual cleansing,[37] while the second ('clear') occurs in contexts where a person acts in a manner proving innocence or where

35. Clements, *Isaiah 1-39*, p. 33.

36. Oswalt, *Isaiah 1-39*, p. 98.

37. See, for example, Exodus 29:4, 17; 30:18, 19, 20, 21; Leviticus 1:9, 13; 8:6; 15:5, 6, 7, 8, 10, 11, 13, 16, 18, 21, 22, 27; 16:4, 24, 26, 28; etc.

questions of character emerge.[38] Taken together they merge ritual and ethical purity, which is of course the purpose of the law. Those who wash themselves by obedient, faith-based repentance prove themselves innocent under the terms Yahweh sets for such post-sin innocence. They become innocent because God directs them on the right path, the path He has set.

Without such guidance, their hands remain covered with blood, so they can hardly take credit for their cleansing. Credit belongs to Yahweh. This passage does not pit ritual cleansing against ethical cleansing, as some commentators seem to suggest.[39] Rather, it indicates that what Deuteronomy repeatedly claims is true: a right relationship with others begins with a right relationship with God, and that this right relationship begins with God's initiative and activity with human beings in their hearts (see Deut. 6–11).

Isaiah's next two imperatives also highlight the need for reform. Israel must **turn aside from harmful acts** and they must **cease to do evil** (1:16). Anything less does not lead to cleansing and innocence. Mental assent that they have done wrong will not suffice, nor will sadness over their deeds. True repentance requires turning aside from the path they have been treading. The fact that their actions have been harmful to others has already been established by the noting of blood on their hands.

Isaiah's final five imperatives prescribe the type of action they need to pursue. Presumably, these positive commands also reveal how they came to have blood on their hands. Sadly, the first thing they must do is **learn the good** (1:17), or **learn to do well**. As Young explains, 'To do well was something new to them, something that had to be learned.'[40] He adds that only the Lord can teach them what is good,

38. See Micah 6:11; Psalm 51:4; Job 15:14; 25:4; Psalms 73:13; 119:9; Proverbs 20:9. For discussion of the origins of this word, consult Wildberger, *Isaiah 1-12*, p. 36.

39. Note for example Sawyer, p. 15; and Watts, *Isaiah 1-33*, p. 21.

40. Young, *Isaiah 1-18*, p. 72.